[redacted]

13 February 2026

Conservation House
18-32 Manners Street
Te Aro, Wellington, 6011
doc.govt.nz

Ref: OIAD-6013

Tēnā koe [redacted]

Thank you for your request to the Department of Conservation (DOC), received on 13 January 2026, in which you asked for:

> *All data held by DOC about beaching or pilot or orca whales in NZ including:*
> *1) Information and research about possible or suspected causes of a) beaching and b) rebeaching*
> *2) The numbers and location of all known a) pilot whale and b) orca beachings and rebeachings in NZ in the last 25 years and longer if data is readily available. For each beaching please include the dates, locations, numbers beached, number that rebeached and number that a) survived, b) died and c) were euthanised*
> *3) Any research or other information on usual grieving processes of pilot and orca whales.*
> *4) Estimated pilot whale and orca whale numbers in NZ waters and any information about their territory and migration.*
> *5) Copies of current and any previous care protocols for beached pilot and orca whales.*

We have considered your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the OIA).

Please note that in our responses we refer to the occurrence of whales becoming immobilised on shore as the more commonly used “stranded” rather than “beached” as used in your request.

Your questions and our responses are listed below:

> *1) Information and research about possible or suspected causes of a) beaching and b) rebeaching*

DOC has commissioned occasional necropsies of individual cetaceans that have stranded and died (for example see the provided Massey report 50531). In some of these cases disease is thought to have been the likely cause of individual strandings. It is generally believed that individual whales strand because they are diseased and/or coming to the end of their natural lifespan. However mass strandings are more contentious, and there are numerous theories. The most likely hypothesis is that pilot whales' echolocation is not well-suited to shallow, gently sloping waters, because they

generally prefer high relief (steep) areas such as the edge of the continental shelf. DOC has not undertaken research on causes of mass strandings or restrandings.

2) The numbers and location of all known a) pilot whale and b) orca beachings and rebeachings in NZ in the last 25 years and longer if data is readily available. For each beaching please include the dates, locations, numbers beached, number that rebeached and number that a) survived, b) died and c) were euthanised

Please see the provided spreadsheet named "NZMMDB Orca and pilot whales.xlsx" and usage notes and caveats in "Read me - CNZMMDB external user information.pdf". The number of whales euthanised at a stranding is recorded on individual stranding paper forms. Historically this was not transferred to the database. However, for recent strandings this has been done and these recent figures are included in the database. Collation of historic cases of euthanasia would be substantial, if these records still exist, and is therefore refused under section 18(f) of the OIA.

3) Any research or other information on usual grieving processes of pilot and orca whales.

DOC has not undertaken research on the grieving process of pilot whales or orca. However, there is research publicly available. We refer you authors such as Berazi and Reggente. It is worth noting that during mass strandings calves might or might not strand next to their mother, see publicly available paper by Oremus *et al* (2013)[1].

4) Estimated pilot whale and orca whale numbers in NZ waters and any information about their territory and migration.

The Southern Hemisphere long finned pilot whale ranges throughout the Southern Ocean. The abundance of the population is not well understood but is likely to be large (see https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/9250/50356171#population). A University of Auckland publicly available study on pilot whale genetics by Oremus *et al*. (2009)[2] showed a strong differentiation between New Zealand pilot whales and Tasmanian pilot whales.

Four types (A, B, C and D) of orca have been recognised in New Zealand waters. Type A is resident in New Zealand and the population is estimated to be between 150 and 200 (https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/native-animals/marine-mammals/dolphins/killer-whale-orca/). We refer you to a publicly available paper by

[1] Oremus, M., Gales, R., Kettles, H., & Baker, C. S. (2013). Genetic evidence of multiple matrilines and spatial disruption of kinship bonds in mass strandings of long-finned pilot whales, Globicephala melas. *Journal of Heredity*, *104*(3), 301-311.
[2] Oremus, M., Gales, R., Dalebout, M. L., Funahashi, N., Endo, T., Kage, T., ... & Baker, S. C. (2009). Worldwide mitochondrial DNA diversity and phylogeography of pilot whales (Globicephala spp.). Biological Journal of the Linnean Society, 98(4), 729-744

Visser (2007)[3] for proposed ranges of three subpopulations within type A. Type C migrates from Antarctica to New Zealand. The other two types (B and D) are considered vagrants to New Zealand. DOC does not hold population estimates for these, please see https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/15421/50368125#population.

5) Copies of current and any previous care protocols for beached pilot and orca whales.

Please find in the resources provided DOC's standard operating procedure and guidelines for responding to strandings. Personal information has been redacted from these documents, under section 9(2)(a). There are numerous historical versions of both documents, in addition to any potential hard-copy material that may be held in archives. We have no reason to believe that there are likely to be substantial differences in these versions. The amount of collation required to satisfy this part of your request would pose an unreasonable administrative burden on the Department, as it would include identifying, collating, reviewing, and redacting where needed, these documents. We also do not believe there is a countervailing public interest in this material. We have considered whether a summary of differences would be useful. However, as previously noted there is no reason to believe that any changes are significant, and the same issues, when balanced against the public interest, arise as with compiling the documents in whole. This part of your request is therefore refused under section 18(f) of the OIA.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

You are entitled to seek an investigation and review of my decision by writing to an Ombudsman as provided by section 28(3) of the OIA.

Please note that this letter (with your personal details removed) and attached documents may be published on DOC's website.

Nāku noa, nā

Kirstie Knowles
Director Biodiversity System and Aquatic
Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

[3] Visser I. N. (2007). Killer whales in new Zealand waters: status and distribution with comments on foraging. in 59th Annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission Scientific Committee. Paper SC/59/SM19. (Anchorage, Alaska: International Whaling Commission).

Document schedule

Item	Date	Document description	Decision
1	19 February 2014	Massey University Necropsy Report	Released in full
2	2026	NZMMDB Orca and Pilot Whale extract	Released in full
3	21 January 2026	Read me – NZMMDB external user information	Released in full
4	30 June 2025	SOP Marine Mammal Response and Readiness	Released in part
5	22 August 2025	Guidelines for attending Marine Mammal Strandings	Released in part