

# Pathology Report

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To: [REDACTED]  
Department of Conservation  
Hamilton

Report Sent: 12/03/2026

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Species: Cetacean	Breed: Maui dolphin		
Age: Juvenile	Sex: Male		
Owner:			Type: Post Mortem
ID: H351			Prev. Accn.:
Submitted:	At Risk:	Affected:	Dead:

## History

Found beachcast

## Gross Findings

This dolphin was chilled and shipped by air freight for necropsy. The body was severely decomposed (code 4+), with liquefaction of the blubber and extensive skin loss. The ventral blubber and skin was dessicated. There was loss of the majority of soft tissue of the oral cavity, throat and cranial thoracic cavity contents. Both eyes were missing. The teeth appeared to have erupted (noting that there was loss of surrounding soft tissue). The left mandible was disarticulated at the symphysis and the temporomandibular joint, and attached to the head by only a small shred of gingival tissue. There was extensive crepitus on palpation of the skull, with visible fragments being broadly symmetrical, suggesting post mortem separation of bone plates associated with decomposition. The remaining skin on the right side of the body had a series of intersecting linear lacerations of varying length, forming a 'criss-cross' pattern. None of the lacerations extended deeper than the skin. Internally, all organs were distended by gas and were either extremely friable or liquefied. Many organs were not recognisable. There were no distinct pelvic organs remaining; one structure possibly representing part of a testis was located and collected for histology. The stomach was empty. The advanced state of decomposition precluded any further interpretation.

## Histopathology

Histology summary: A selection of tissues were fixed and processed for histology. All were severely autolysed, with only the lung being readily identifiable. One section of tissue showed some architectural features of testis, but cellular detail was not sufficient to be sure.

## Diagnosis

Open

## Comments

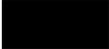
Assessing for death due to entanglement is an important component of any beachcast dolphin necropsy investigation. This includes looking for evidence of net marks on the skin as well as ruling out other causes of death. A range of tissues from this dolphin were examined histologically (under the microscope), but all were badly affected by decomposition. This meant that it was difficult even to identify the organs, and impossible to interpret any lesions that may have been present. Because of this, it is not possible to rule out other (non-bycatch) causes of death in this dolphin.

There were clear linear cuts (lacerations) and indentations on the body however, and the origin of these markings needs to be carefully considered. As part of this investigation, I sent necropsy images of the skin lesions to four international marine mammal experts who are all highly experienced in necropsy of bycaught cetaceans. Overall, the skin lesions were assessed as not typical of bycatch, particularly the irregular distances between the lacerations and an absence of knot marks (which are usually obvious) at the angles where the lacerations intersect. An alternative explanation considered was that the lacerations occurred as the carcass washed back and forth over shellfish beds (oyster or mussel shells). The following statement summarises the consensus opinion:

“Based on a conservative approach due to the level of decomposition, none of the observed lesions and defects are considered typical or diagnostic of entanglement or peracute underwater entrapment. While some defects may be interpreted as ligature wounds or entanglement lacerations, some of their characteristics are not consistent with the likely physics or typical presentation of lesions in known entanglements of small cetaceans. Conversely, because of the epidermal absence/sloughing and decompositional state, I am unable to exclude the possibility of entanglement as a contributory factor. ”

Note that the extent of decomposition also means that we can't rule out disease or any other cause of death, hence the best diagnosis in this case is 'open', i.e. the cause of death could not be determined.

Based on the markings and on the broad architectural details from histology of the fragment of tissue collected from the pelvic area of the abdominal cavity, this dolphin has been entered onto the database as a male; genetic analysis may be able to confirm this.

Date: 02/03/2026	Pathologists:	
Students:		