

Thank you

Your efforts are much appreciated by the Department of Conservation. Many marine mammals are saved each year with the help of volunteers – every effort contributes to their conservation.

For more information, see
www.doc.govt.nz/strandings
and projectjonah.org.nz

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[New Zealand Government](http://www.govt.nz)

Stranded whales and dolphins

How you can help



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Health and safety

Whale strandings can be dangerous. Your safety is of paramount importance when helping at a stranding – DOC will take all practicable steps to minimise the risks to you.

Please follow the directions of DOC staff at all times.

You are responsible for your own safety and belongings:

- ▶ On arrival, report to DOC staff at the Stranding Base.
- ▶ Volunteers in the water must be fit, healthy and able to swim.
- ▶ Work in teams and partner up with a ‘buddy’.
- ▶ Stay well clear of the tail and mouth – whales can become agitated when stressed.
- ▶ Take care not to come into contact with body fluids or blowhole exhalant as marine mammals can carry diseases. Use rubber gloves for handling injured animals and cover any abrasions you may have.
- ▶ Attend to your own and your family’s needs before those of the animals’ – drink plenty, take breaks as necessary, be sun smart, stay warm and stay safe! You are responsible for your own children.
- ▶ Take particular care when in the water – never go beyond your comfort zone and stay visible to boats.
- ▶ Advise your GP if you become ill within 2 months of handling a marine mammal.

You will need:

- ✓ Wet suit
- ✓ Windproof/waterproof jacket
- ✓ Sturdy shoes or wetsuit booties
- ✓ Shorts and long-sleeved shirt
- ✓ Warm clothing and hat for cold conditions
- ✓ A complete change of warm clothes
- ✓ Sunhat, sunglasses, sunblock
- ✓ Durable rubber gloves and disinfectant
- ✓ High energy food & drink
- ✓ Sleeping bag, ground sheet and toiletries
- ✓ Plastic bags for wet stuff
- ✓ Old sheets and pillowcases
- ✓ Shovels and buckets

Do not bring dogs or expensive camera equipment to a stranding. Remember to remove watches and jewellery that may be lost or may damage a whale’s skin.



Why do whales and dolphins strand?

Whales and dolphins belong to a group of animals referred to as cetaceans, a name derived from the Greek word *ketos*, meaning sea monster. These taonga (treasured) species are noted for their intelligence and full adaptation to aquatic life. And yet ... they strand.

Throughout New Zealand, these sleek ocean wanderers turn up on our beaches, where without our help it is likely they would take their last breath. New Zealand is a hotspot for marine mammal strandings, with most involving just one or two animals. Mass strandings on the other hand, may involve hundreds of animals.

Stranding is a natural phenomenon that has been occurring for millennia but is still not fully understood. Theories on why cetaceans strand are numerous, but in most cases the cause is unknown and is unlikely to be due to any one factor alone. Possible factors include navigational error, unusual geographic features, impaired health and extreme weather events to name but a few.

The Department of Conservation (DOC) responds to an average of 85 stranding incidents per year, usually of single animals; the most common species being common dolphins, pygmy sperm whales and beaked whales. On occasion mass strandings occur and the majority of these are long-finned pilot whales. Even large whales such as sperm whales have been known to strand occasionally.

DOC’s role

The Department of Conservation is legally responsible for enforcing the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978. This means that DOC is in charge at marine mammal stranding events. As the lead decision maker, DOC’s responsibilities include:

- ▶ Protecting the welfare of stranded animals
- ▶ Disposing of any dead marine mammals
- ▶ Ensuring the health and safety of staff, volunteers, and the public
- ▶ Enabling cultural protocols – this involves consulting with local iwi and hapū through every step of the stranding, including rescue, euthanasia, sampling and disposal
- ▶ Enabling research, e.g. through the collection of scientific samples.

Helping at a stranding

Anyone can help out at a stranding event as long as they are physically able. To be more prepared to help at a stranding you can attend a Marine Mammal Medic Course run by Project Jonah. Medics who have completed the course will be well equipped to help rescue stranded whales and dolphins and can act as a role model to untrained rescuers. Being trained by Project Jonah means you will be more aware of the rescue process, including health and safety risks, making the process run more safely and smoothly.

Stages of a response

There are five stages in a stranding rescue response. No two strandings are the same however, so please follow the directions of DOC staff at all times. This can be crucial for your safety and the success of a rescue, and in many cases is required under the law.

Sometimes DOC staff will need to humanely put down animals; please be prepared for this outcome.

If you are the first on the scene, contact DOC immediately on 0800 DOCHOT (0800 362 468). To keep animals calm, avoid loud noises, keep dogs and small children away and make no unnecessary movements.

To ascertain if an animal is alive, gently touch the blowhole; if there is no response, very gently touch the edge of the eyeball. If no response is seen, the whale is most likely dead. Dead whales will be checked and marked by DOC staff.



1. Immediate care

Aim: To prevent more animals dying, reduce stress, and increase chances of survival

Stay clear of the tail as this can cause injury.

In suitable conditions (i.e. not too windy), cover animals with wet sheets and begin gently bucketing water onto them. Do not cover the blow hole or pour water into the opening (to prevent this, wait until the animal has taken a breath before pouring). Concentrate on flippers and flukes (tail).

If an animal is on its side: try to get the whale upright by digging a shallow trench parallel to the belly, remove sheets, and gently roll the animal into the trench. Ideally use at least 4–6 people. Keep flippers tucked downwards into sides, and once the whale is upright, dig small holes for the flippers to hang freely into. If the whale is too big or suctioned into wet sand, do not over-exert or cause injury to yourself or others.



2. Moving

Aim: To move animals to deeper water, and to bring scattered animals together

Ensure all people are aware to avoid the tail and the mouth over the next stages, as these are powerful and can cause injury.

Moving the animals generally begins when water is about knee deep or more around the animals.

Only people with wetsuits should be involved from this stage on.

Coincide your re-floating efforts with waves for increased buoyancy.

Tarpaulins, slings or pontoons may be used to shift smaller animals, under the guidance of DOC.

Avoid moving animals over rough surfaces when not fully buoyant.

Do not tow animals by fins, flippers or tails.



3. Reorientation

Aim: To prepare the animals for release and decrease the chance of re-stranding

Once in waist-deep water begin gently rocking the animal from side to side. Have at least 2 people per animal. This should be carried out for as long as possible to allow the animal to familiarise itself with movement in water.

Bring all animals together so the pod can be released together. Wait until the last animal is ready for release.

Reorientation time will vary depending on the condition of the animals but can take an hour or more. Subject to conditions, each animal should have had at least 30 minutes.

Assess whether the animal can:

- ▶ Surface to breathe unassisted
- ▶ Orientate and stay upright in the water
- ▶ Self-right if rolled onto its side.



4. Release

Aim: To release all of the animals in one group

Release animals in water deep enough for them to swim but shallow enough for helpers to walk. Do not release until given the go ahead from rescue crew. A co-ordinated release will greatly increase the chances of a successful refloat.

Any whales showing aggressive behaviour are to be avoided and identified to the person coordinating the release.



5. Monitoring

Aim: To prevent re-strandings

You may be asked to form a human chain parallel to the shore, creating a barrier between the animals and the beach. If you are, ensure you remain in a comfortable depth of water, and not above shoulder height when standing. Stay in line in the human chain. At this stage, animals may become defensive of the pod and may become agitated or aggressive if approached. This may be displayed as tail slapping, swimming close by, or open-mouthed lunging.

Striking metal objects or slapping the water's surface can deter animals from returning to shallow water.

DOC boats may be used to help herd animals offshore.

Be aware that animals can be groggy, disoriented, and can be very determined to return to shore. Do not jeopardise your own safety to stop the animals returning.

