MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING RESPONSE FACT SHEET

What is a stranded marine mammal?

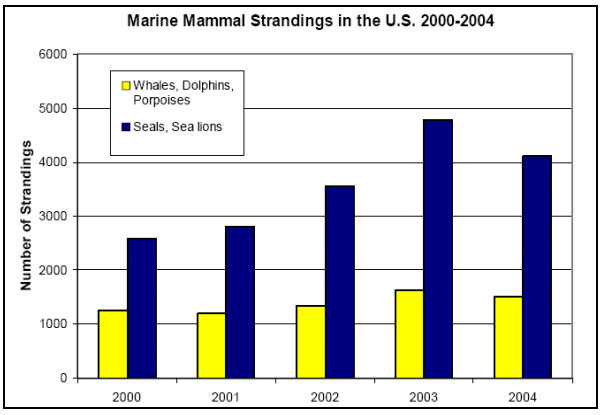
A cetacean (whale, dolphin, or porpoise) is considered stranded when it is on the beach, dead or alive, or in need of medical attention while free-swimming in U.S. waters. A pinniped (seal or sea lion) is considered to be stranded either when dead or when in distress on the beach and not displaying normal haul-out behaviors. Live-stranded animals are usually in need of medical attention or free-swimming but cannot return to their natural habitat without assistance.

Single strandings involve one animal per event and occur frequently, depending on geographic area and time of year. Each year, 2,500 to 6,000 stranded marine mammals are reported to the National Marine Mammal Stranding Network.

Mass strandings involve more than two cetaceans (excluding cow/calf pairs) stranding at the same time and place. Several causes have been determined or implicated, including, but not limited to, extreme weather events, tidal changes, disease of all or a single group member, or human-related events.

Unusual Mortality Events involve strandings or mortalities that occur abnormally (are unexpected, involve a significant die-off of a marine mammal population, and demand immediate response). Special investigation teams are assembled to determine the causes of these events.

Pilot whale mass stranding, New England
Photo by Cape Cod Stranding Network



Why do marine mammals strand?

In many stranding cases, the cause of stranding is unknown, but some identified causes include:

- infectious disease, including parasite infestation
- starvation (e.g., associated with El Niño events)
- pollution exposure
- trauma (e.g., injuries from ship strikes or fishery entanglements)
- sound (human-generated or natural)
- harmful algal blooms and associated biotoxins
- unusual weather or oceanographic events
- ingestion of marine debris

Who responds to marine mammal strandings?

The **National Marine Mammal Stranding Network** created under the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program consists of over 100 organizations partnered with NOAA Fisheries Service to investigate marine mammal strandings. These stranding networks are established in all coastal states and are authorized through Stranding Agreements from NOAA Fisheries Service regional offices. They consist of professionals and volunteers from nonprofit organizations, aquaria, universities, and state and local governments who are trained in stranding response, animal health, and disease. Through a National Coordinator and six regional coordinators, NOAA Fisheries Service oversees, coordinates, participates in, and authorizes the response activities and provides training to personnel.

MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING RESPONSE FACT SHEET (continued)

What is the response to an unusual mortality event?

In 1992, Congress authorized NOAA Fisheries to establish a Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events. This group consists of external experts and is consulted when a situation arises where marine mammals are dying in an unusual way. The group determines if the mortality event is "unusual", and recommends an appropriate response.

The group reviews all possible information, including historical data and current population trends, and determines whether or not an event is truly unusual within 24 hours of the initial consultation. After the working group announces their decision, NMFS officially declares the event unusual and appoints an on-site coordinator. If it is deemed unusual, the Working Group will provide advice to NMFS as to what samples should be collected or how the investigation should be conducted.

In addition, the group provides advice and possibly assists with the entire investigation. When an event is deemed unusual, money from the Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Event Fund, which is managed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and NOAA Protected Resources, becomes available to assist with the investigation.

Since 1991, the Working Group has consulted on 33 marine mammal mortality events in the U.S.

For more information on unusual mortality events, visit:
http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/

Bottlenose dolphins from a 2004 unusual mortality event near Panama City, Florida. Photo by NOAA

What is learned from stranded whales and dolphins?

National Marine Mammal Tissue Bank samples are archived in liquid nitrogen. Photo by NIST

Stranding events provide a tremendous amount of information to researchers and resource managers. NMFS facilitates the exchange of information between Stranding Network members to continually improve the response and treatment of animals. The information collected provides many insights into the lives of whales and dolphins including seasonal distribution, natural history, population health, environmental contaminant levels, cases of human interaction, and incidence of disease. In some cases, the only existing information about certain species has been learned from stranding events.

Where can I find more information?

On the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program website:
http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/