



24 September 2020

Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment

Macquarie Harbour whale stranding update

Marine conservation experts and trained volunteers have rescued 88 long-finned pilot whales from the mass stranding on Tasmania's west coast.

The rescue team are now working to free a few more live whales from the sandbar at Macquarie Harbour.

Incident Controller and Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) regional manager Nic Deka said the number of freed whales is expected to grow by the end of the day.

"There is a likelihood that we will be continuing the rescue effort tomorrow. We are finding a few more animals that are potentially viable. Our focus has been on those that appear the most viable and have the most chance of success. As we moved across the sandbar we have found a few more that we will focus our efforts on," Mr Deka.

"The additional whales located bring the number of live whales that will be prioritised for release to about 20, however the number may grow as the crews continue to work."

Marine Conservation Program wildlife biologist Dr Kris Carlyon said the release of about 90 whales is an absolute fantastic result for the team of rescuers.

"On Monday as we were coming up with plans, if we had said 90 we would have been very happy with that. We are really, really pleased with that number," Dr Carlyon said.

"The animals are being released into deep water outside of the gates of Macquarie Harbour and then they are on their own. Tracking work in the past has shown that animals released individually do reform after a period and behave as we would expect. We are hoping they are forming those bonds again."

"This species is generally led by matriarchs and if the group have lost those older females with that built up knowledge of the area and the food resources over time then they may need to learn some behaviours."

"They face some challenges for sure, but we expect that if they remain at sea and out in deeper water, they will regain normal behaviour," Dr Carlyon said.

The total number of whales that have died on Macquarie Harbour is estimated to be about 380. This number may decrease as many of the whales are submerged, making it difficult to count.

Four whales were euthanised this morning for humane reasons.

Mr Deka said plans are now underway to dispose of the whales who have died, and advice had been sought from the CSIRO on oceanic information for planning purposes regarding the disposal of whale carcasses.

“We have been taking a lot of advice from experts and advice from the companies who work here. They know the harbour, they know the tides and they certainly have the equipment to assist us,” Mr Deka said.

The preference for removal and disposal of the carcasses remains at sea.

Mr Deka said the team’s aim is to remove the carcasses as quickly as possible, but it could take several days.

Dr Carlyon thanked scientists from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) who are undertaking biopsy sampling and measurements of the dead whales. These samples will provide each animals’ DNA profile and whether they are related to each other, along with contributing to knowledge of the species’ biology and behaviour.

For more information about the whale stranding visit the DPIPWE Marine Conservation Program Facebook page and the DPIPWE website: <https://dpiipwe.tas.gov.au/whale-stranding>

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