When are whales euthanased?
DEC wildlife officers, with the assistance of qualified vets, always carry out a clinical assessment of sick or injured whales before deciding on the best course of action in each case. Some beached whales die within hours while others may take many days. Euthanasia may be the most appropriate course of action available. The euthanasia technique used is largely determined by the animal's size and location. Generally, a suitable calibre firearm is the most humane and effective method for smaller animals while the focused implosion method, which involves explosives, is the safest and most effective method for larger animals. This method, which is internationally recognised, has been developed and refined over 20 years and results in an instantaneous death while managing risk to the public and staff involved.

Can I help the wildlife officers?
Safety is a primary consideration at strandings. Whales can roll onto people in the water near them, so we ask that you maintain a safe distance from any animals and follow the instructions of DEC staff. Whales and dolphins are powerful animals and can cause serious injuries. They may also carry zoonotic diseases. It is important that members of the public do not attempt to push stranded animals back out to sea as experience has shown that they will re-strand, causing severe stress, injury and death. Volunteers are always needed and are welcome to assist during mass stranding rescues. Volunteers must be registered and follow the directions of DEC staff.

What happens with mass strandings?
The largest mass stranding of whales dealt with in WA occurred in 1996 in Dunsborough. It involved 320 long-finned pilot whales. All but 20 animals survived in this case, however, multiple factors at play including location and weather can affect the survival rate. DEC's incident control system provides a clear reporting structure and well defined roles that have been very effective since it was first applied to a mass stranding at Augusta in 1986. During a rescue first aid is provided to whales, such as keeping the blow hole clear and keeping their skin wet and cool, while plans are made to return the animals to the sea. This may involve transporting whales to safe holding areas where they are treated to counter the effects of being stranded. When wildlife officers carry out rescues, they develop a strategy to deal with the prevailing conditions and take great care to carry the animals gently in slings to minimise distress and prevent damage to tissue and internal organs. Once they are ready to be released they are guided out to sea using boats. The reason why these mass strandings occur is still unknown. There are many theories including the shape of the coastline being a contributing factor, whales responding to distress calls from other whales, or groups following a leader into shore.

Who do I call if I see a stranded whale or dolphin?
To report a stranding, entanglement or a marine mammal in distress, please call **DEC's Wildcare Helpline on 9474 9055.**

To find out more visit www.dec.wa.gov.au

What to do:

1. Think about your safety first.
2. Call the **Wildcare Helpline on (08) 9474 9055** – an available officer will arrive at the earliest opportunity.
3. While waiting for assistance, try not to make much noise.
4. Keep the animal's skin moist with buckets of water where possible.
5. Listen to the instructions of the wildlife officer.

What NOT to do:

1. **DO NOT** put your safety or the safety of others at risk.
2. **DO NOT** stand close to the tail or head.
3. **DO NOT** touch the animal more than necessary – do not push or pull on the flippers, flukes or head, or cover the blowhole.
4. **DO NOT** attempt to push the animal back out to sea – this will only add to its suffering.
5. **DO NOT** apply sunscreen even if the animal's skin is burnt.

March 2011

*****Please dispose of this brochure responsibly*****

Whale and dolphin strandings

Bottlenose dolphin

To report a stranding call the Wildcare Helpline on

9474 9055

Department of
Environment and Conservation

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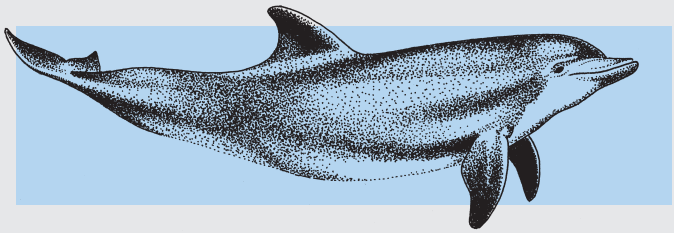
Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)

Bottlenose dolphins are often seen riding on bow waves created by boats, surfing waves or leaping playfully into the air. They use echolocation to find prey and to develop a picture of their surroundings. They make clicking sounds and wait for the echo to return from surrounding objects, which enables them to determine how far away the object is and how big it might be. The inner ear of a bottlenose dolphin is adapted for hearing ultrasonic frequencies far beyond the range of human hearing and even that of bats.

Description: Bottlenose dolphins have a prominent dorsal fin, slightly hooked and set midway along the body, which slices through the water. This frequently photographed mammal is also easily recognised by its well-formed melon and short, wide and rounded beak. The species has a medium grey back above a pale or light grey flank or belly. The flippers are broad at the base and taper to a point. The average length of these mammals is three metres and newborn calves are about a metre long.



Status and distribution: This species is common in cold, temperate and tropical seas and estuaries all over the world. It is often seen close inshore in estuaries, even entering rivers, and an offshore form is found in the open ocean. In some parts of the world bottlenose dolphins are killed for food.

Life history: Within a population, bottlenose dolphins form small subgroups which inhabit a defined home range. The species lives for 25 to 30 years and females begin to breed from about six years of age, calving every two or three years. Calves suckle for up to 18 months. Bottlenose dolphins eat a wide variety of fish, squid and octopuses. They will often hunt cooperatively, herding schools of fish against the shore or encircling them.

Stranding history: Bottlenose dolphins often strand. In October 1990, 11 bottlenose dolphins were returned to the Peel Inlet after becoming trapped in a shallow inland lake and shallow rivers near Mandurah. A major concern when they strand is the risk of sunburn and many animals carry scars from burning

Photos – D K Coughran

Frequently asked questions

Strandings in Western Australia
The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is responsible for wildlife conservation in WA and DEC officers are usually the first people called to a marine mammal stranding. DEC wildlife officers have gained vast experience with strandings over the years and are highly respected in Australia and internationally, regularly exchanging advice and information through networks and workshops. DEC also works closely with local authorities, volunteers and service providers during stranding incidents.

Which whales and dolphins live in Western Australian waters?
A total of 35 cetacean (whale and dolphin) species have been recorded in WA waters, which is more than 80 per cent of the 43 species found in or close to Australia. Humpback whales are among the most frequently sighted great whales in WA waters. Their annual 13,000 kilometre migration takes them from Antarctica to the warmer waters off the state's northwest to breed and give birth from May to June and they return with their new calves by December. The west coast humpback population, once hunted to near extinction, is currently estimated at more than 22,000 and is recognised as one of the most successful populations in the world to recover from whaling.

Southern right whales are a much anticipated in-shore visitor, although only few more than 2,000 individuals visit Australia during their breeding season on the south coast to give birth and nurse their calves. Some of them move up the west coast, as far north as North West Cape, and may be seen close to shore, just behind the breakers, which can lead people to mistakenly believe they are about to strand. Other marine mammals that we are fortunate to encounter include bottlenose dolphins, blue whales, long-finned pilot whales and false killer whales.

What happens when a marine mammal strands?
Strandings of marine mammals – many of them single animals – occur much more frequently than most people realise along the extensive coastline of WA. Not all strandings are reported as they often happen in remote and unpopulated areas. There are many successful rescue stories involving toothed whales and dolphins of small to medium size. However there are also many sad cases when rescue is not possible and in most instances, particularly involving baleen whales such as humpbacks, the animals will only come ashore when they are very sick or dying. There is little wildlife officers can do to help stranded humpbacks as these whales can weigh in excess of 40,000 kilograms and they are too big to move without causing severe damage and injury. Intervention in these situations represents a serious risk and DEC's most important priority is to the safety of the public and staff. The death of beached baleen whales can take many days and DEC must determine if the provision of palliative care to allow the whale to die naturally or euthanasia to end the animal's suffering is in the animal's best interests.