

Details of Short-Finned Pilot Whales found beached at New Airport Beach, Utila – 6 October 2008

The following information was collated by staff and volunteers of the Utila Centre for Marine Ecology.

In the early hours of October 6th, 5 pilot whales were found stranded on the shores of Utila, near the new airport. All of the whales were dead when found. It is not known why pods of whales do this, but pilot whales are known to strand more often than most others.

The whales were all facing the ocean and appeared to have regurgitated large chunks of squid which could be found in abundance around the area where the whales were. Of the five, only the largest was male and it was he who appeared to show any outward sign of illness or disease. His body was covered in white lesions that looked like they could have been some kind of skin infection, virus or disease. Scientists and volunteers from the Utila Centre for Marine Ecology took photos of the abrasions and have since sent them off to some of Europe's leading Marine Mammal pathologists and posted them on various on line forums in hopes that someone will be able to identify the illness in question. DNA and blubber samples were taken by the Utila Whale Shark Research Project and those samples will be taken to be tested in the states.

GPS position: N16°06'53.0", W086°52'22.0"

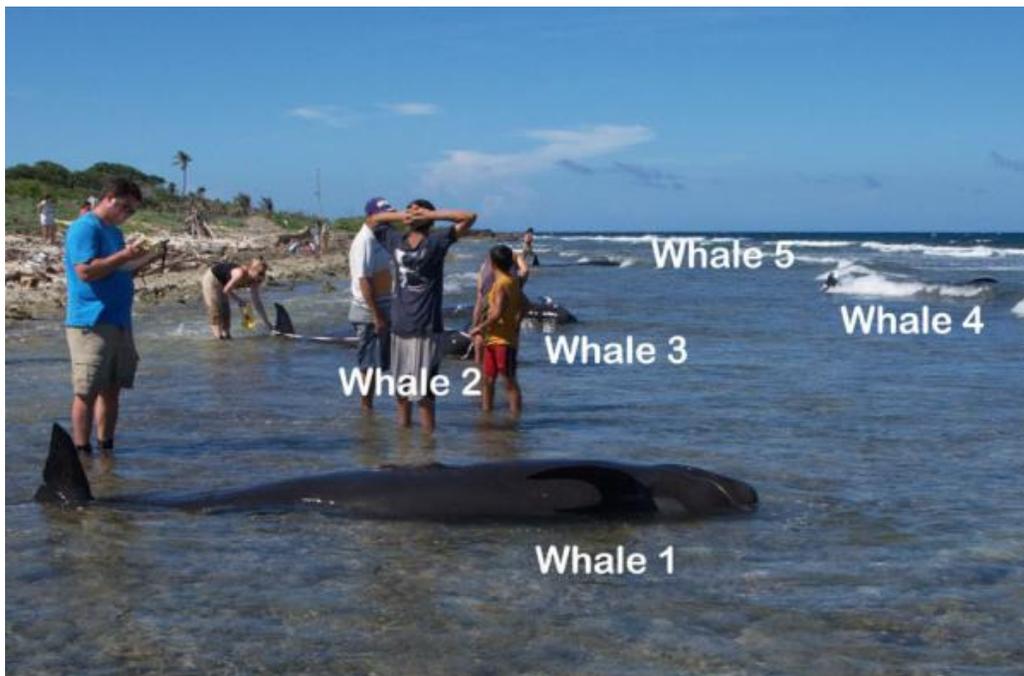


Photo courtesy of Alan Greensgill

<p>Whale 1 Length: 3.5m Distance from shore: 5.4m Sex: presumed female</p>	<p>Whale 2 Length: 3.5m Distance from shore: 4m Sex: presumed female</p>	<p>Whale 3 Length: 3.3m Distance from shore: 5m Sex: presumed female</p>
<p>Whale 4 Length: 4.7m Distance from shore: 11.6m Sex: presumed male.</p>	<p>Whale 5 Length: 3.5m Distance from shore: 5m Sex: presumed female.</p>	

The day after the stranding, staff from the Iguana Station, the Whale Shark Oceanic Research Centre and the Environmental Officer of the Municipality attempted to cut open one of the whales to identify if there had been any plausible cause of death visible from the stomach contents. They found squid and a small piece of plastic. Because the corpses had already been on the beach over 24 hours when they cut the animal open, they did not take any samples and just made observations. The team stripped the carcass of as much flesh as possible and buried the bones on the one animal.

A larger lesson and an urgent need for a coordinated response.

With no current protocol nor legislation in place for such events the Utila Centre for Marine Ecology had no authority to prevent the following chain of events from happening and as an organization is frustrated both by the lack of respect for these animals and for any relevant response at a local or national level. There is an urgent need for a central organization to coordinate stranding events and for a chain of data collection, use and dissemination to be clearly thought out.

Below are examples of events that followed the stranding that UCME was powerless to intercede with:

As there was no one directly in control of the stranding, people were free to do as they wished many people came out to the beach to see the whales and some individuals were seen cutting the teeth out from the whales’ mouths.; touching, mounting and even carving their names into the whales.

An additional whale was cut open by a resident who wanted to collect the skull of the animal. He found an almost intact squid that was about 2 feet in length and barely chewed at all in the mouth of the animal and more squid in the stomach. He cut off the head and now has it submerged at his dock until the decomposition is complete after which point he will add it to his personal collection of skulls. The rest of the open carcass was left on the beach.

Of the 3 remaining whales, 2 were towed out to sea by one of the local dive shops and tied to a mooring buoy. The idea was that one would be picked up by Anthony's Key Resort on the neighbouring island of Roatán and the other would be sunk a local dive site as an attraction for divers.

Efforts were made by the Municipality's Environmental Officer to have one of the whales picked up by the staff of Anthony's Key Resort to be examined and eventually to have the skeleton put on display at their Roatan Institute of Marine Science, but they were not able to get a boat over to pick one up.

The whale that was to be sunk was weighted down with cinder blocks but the whale's body would not sink. Staff from a local dive shop thinking it could be due to decomposition gases decided to shoot the carcass in an attempt to release the gases but to no avail. Eventually, the corpse did sink to the bottom and shortly there after efforts were made to remove the cinder blocks and lay the whale out in a sandy patch where it would continue to decompose until there was only a skeleton left.

Finally, the remaining carcasses; one whole, one decapitated were cleaned of their flesh by a team of experts from the Museum of Natural History in Tegucigalpa. The skeletons of some of the whales will hopefully be preserved so that they can be put on display in Utila and Tegucigalpa.

A decree was released by the Municipality Environmental Officer proclaiming that the buried carcasses were the property of the Municipality and that they would be in the control of The Iguana Station until they are ready to be reassembled.

Due to the lack of communication, collaboration and protocol throughout this event, it has been suggested by all of the organizations involved that a proper protocol and procedure be laid out for the future clearly stating who will be in charge of handling further strandings in Utila and what should be done in that case.

Utila Centre for marine Ecology currently collects cetacean distribution and behavioral data from direct observation and through sightings reported by fishermen and dive shops. There is an urgent need for a Honduran Cetacean Unit which UCME is happy to spearhead in support of the local authorities, but currently lacks the funding for such an initiative. Island wide cetacean education is also a high priority.