

## **CETACEAN STRANDING RESPONSE PROTOCOL**

### **IRISH WHALE AND DOLPHIN GROUP**

In response to the survey of global stranding responses being conducted by the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS), the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) has produced the following guide to the protocols which they have adopted in response to cetacean strandings in Ireland.

#### Response Alerts and Public Education

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) are the statutory body responsible for live-stranded cetaceans in Ireland and the local wildlife conservation ranger will usually be the first point of contact for the IWDG in the event of a stranding. The IWDG maintains a network of regional contacts in coastal areas and, where IWDG assistance is requested by NPWS staff, these will be contacted to organize an effective local response from other IWDG members, experienced personnel etc.

IWDG members conduct talks and workshops on cetaceans throughout Ireland, which would include information on who to contact in the event of a live stranding. IWDG has produced a booklet, 'Face to Face with a Beached Whale' which offers advice on best practice when dealing with stranded cetaceans.

#### Management of Strandings – Who is Responsible?

IWDG believes that responsibility for live-stranded cetaceans in Ireland rests with NPWS, which would be represented locally by the wildlife conservation rangers.

#### Triage and Responses to Individual and Mass Strandings

IWDG does not believe that re-flotation of stranded animals is always the best option, but the first response should be to make the animal(s) as comfortable and stress-free as possible. In this we aim to follow recognized 'best practice' regarding the welfare of stranded cetaceans. IWDG will normally only consider re-flotation after looking at individual circumstances (eg coastal or off-shore species, body condition, location etc.) and recommends consultation with an experienced veterinarian.

#### Reflotation Techniques and Equipment

IWDG maintains three live-stranding kits at strategic locations around the country and one set of pontoons on the west coast. The live stranding kits are designed to cater for animals up to 4m long and contain air mattresses, tarpaulins, veterinary equipment, torches, buckets etc. The pontoons are used for re-flotation of larger animals, to about 6m in length, and if necessary, the smaller kits may be used to stabilize these animals while waiting for the pontoons to arrive.

### Beach Therapy (antibiotics, re-hydration etc.)

While IWDG will attempt to stabilize stranded cetaceans and reduce stress, specialized beach therapy, such as administration of antibiotics will only be left to experienced veterinarians.

### Transportation

There is no specialized mode of transportation for cetaceans in Ireland. In general, an animal will only be transported to a new location where this is deemed to be the best option available, and where a suitable vehicle can be sourced locally. This would normally be in the case of an animal deemed fit for re-flotation, which may be moved to a more suitable site nearby. In the current circumstances, IWDG would not consider transportation of animals over distance times greater than 45min.

### Captive Rehabilitation Options

There are currently no facilities available in Ireland for the captive rehabilitation of cetaceans.

### Euthanasia

Stranded cetaceans should only be euthanased following consultation with an experienced veterinarian, who will also be responsible for administering the injection. In Ireland, Sodium pentobarbitone is the drug used for euthanasia by veterinarians. In larger cetaceans, where this drug is unsuitable, euthanasia is not an option. In this situation, the IWDG would aim to allow an animal to die naturally, with as little stress as possible (as per management of the public below)

### Management of Rescue Workers

Where possible, IWDG believes that management of rescue workers at a stranding should be assumed by the most experienced person(s) on site. It may be the case that some volunteers could get into potentially dangerous situations in their eagerness to help and IWDG insists that the first priority in any stranding event is the safety of rescuers and onlookers.

### Managing the public at Stranding Events

A live stranding event can be quite an emotional situation, especially for those who have little or no previous experience of it. IWDG recommends taking time to answer questions and explaining what is happening and why. Where possible, the person in charge of the rescue may seek help from members of the public, where this can be done safely.

In order to reduce stress on a stranded cetacean, IWDG recommends preventing access of dogs to the animal. It may also be prudent to limit access of onlookers and the live-stranding kits contain stakes and tape to set up an 'exclusion zone'. Often a police officer will be present on-site and will assume responsibility for the management of the public.

#### Zoonoses (Occurrence and Protection Against)

Little information is currently available on the occurrence of zoonoses in cetaceans found in Irish waters. IWDG recommends a precautionary approach and recommends that people avoid contact with exhalations from the blowhole or exudations from the body. Gloves should be worn where practicable and hands and other exposed skin should be washed thoroughly after the stranding and/or before eating, drinking or smoking.

#### Training of Staff and Volunteers

IWDG believes that the best way of minimizing risk to rescue workers is by providing training involving theoretical and practical instruction. To this end, IWDG has purchased a life-size model of a bottlenose dolphin which can be 'refloated' in a safe and controlled manner during instruction. IWDG has conducted a number of live-stranding courses, some of which have been held in conjunction with British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) and the Irish Seal Sanctuary (ISS).

#### Network Approaches

#### Funding Rescue Activities and Resources

As an environmental non-governmental organization, IWDG is reliant on funding received from member's subscriptions, grants and donations. As live-stranding response is only a small part of IWDG activities, funding for this area is limited. As mentioned above, IWDG maintain 3 live-stranding kits ,1 set of rescue pontoons and 1 life-size dolphin for use in training courses. Where possible, excess funds raised from training courses are used to provide more equipment. Rescuers' time at strandings is provided voluntarily and other equipment, such as boats or vehicles are usually loaned through the goodwill of local people.

#### Strandings Reports and Identification

IWDG maintains a database of recorded cetacean strandings (live and dead) around the Irish coast since 1990. A stranding form (example enclosed) is filled out providing details of recorder, date, location, species, sex and length, with space also provided for attaching photographs. Where possible, an IWDG regional contact will visit a stranding to confirm i.d. and remove samples where necessary. Strandings are validated when published in the Irish Naturalists Journal (INJ). The strandings database can be accessed on-line at [www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie)

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