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Disorientation Seen in Mass Australia Whale Deaths

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AUSTRALIA: October 28, 2005

SYDNEY - The death of about 110 stranded whales in the southern Australian state of Tasmania was probably caused by the animals becoming disoriented in confusing coastal waters, officials said on Thursday.

The long-finned pilot whales died after two separate strandings on Tuesday and Wednesday in the Marion Bay area, on the southeastern coast of the island state.

Mark Pharaoh, the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service official in charge of the incident, said the most likely reason for the stranding was the complex topography of the area.

"It's a very common area for strandings," Pharaoh told Reuters by telephone from Marion Bay.

"The most common belief here is that, since these strandings are so regular, it's basically difficult country for a whale to navigate in," he said.

Pharaoh said the whales were stranded in a large bay with frequently changing water depths, sandy spits and rocky outcrops, as well as a narrow opening to the ocean.

"I think they got themselves all disoriented about what's going on," he said.

Pharaoh said teams of wildlife officials and volunteers had managed to save about 19 whales. The 110 dead whales had been buried, he added.

SONAR QUESTIONS

Weather patterns, environmental change and military and industrial underwater seismic testing have all been blamed for whale strandings.

Last week, a coalition of environmental groups sued the

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US Navy over the use of sonar, saying that the ear-splitting sounds can cause mass whale and dolphin strandings and internal bleeding.

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Tasmania's Green Party has called for a national summit on whale strandings, and for the national government to provide more information on the use of sonar by the navy.

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The Australian Department of Defence denied two of its minesweepers that had used short-range, high-frequency sonar in the area could have contributed to the latest stranding.

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It said the ships used sonar just south of Marion Bay as part of a search for the anchor from a Dutch vessel that sank more than 360 years ago, but that it was after the strandings appeared to have begun.

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Meanwhile, the oil industry said its seismic testing was unlikely to be responsible for the strandings, the Australian Broadcasting Corp. (ABC) reported.

Mark McCallum, from the Australian Petroleum Producers and Exploration Association, told the ABC the closest activity it had at the moment was between Tasmania and Victoria, about 440 km (275 miles) from Marion Bay.

In November 2004, 115 long-finned pilot whales and bottle-nosed dolphins died in two separate strandings off Tasmania, prompting the Australian government to establish a national database on strandings.

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