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DISASTER AND ACCIDENT

## Whale Dies on Molokai

Possible causes point to Navy sonar exercises and kidney disease.

By *The Molokai Dispatch* staff

KAUNAKAKAI, Hawaii (STPNS) -- The community was out in full force last week Monday when a Cuvier's beaked whale was found injured and sick along the Kawela coast, but despite the efforts of many, the day ended with a death.



Marine specialists, local residents and firemen all pitched in to help the Cuvier's beaked whale as it struggled for hours on the Kawela coast.

*Staff Photo*

Local residents, marine specialists and firemen spent hours in and around the water trying to help the whale as it struggled just off the coast around mile markers five and six on the East End.

However, on the recommendation of a veterinarian, the whale was eventually put down before being flown to Oahu. While speculations emerge on the possible causes of what is a rare occurrence for a Cuvier's beaked whale, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has begun analyzing the results of an autopsy performed last week in Honolulu.

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### A Community Effort

The 2,500-pound whale was found at around 7 a.m. by vacationer Drew Murphy, who noticed the whale struggling in a mud flat and summoned his daughter, Miley, to take their kayaks to try to help the animal back into the ocean.

They were soon joined in their efforts by neighbors Mel Paoa and his boys, as Murphy made a call to NOAA. They pushed the whale back into the water three times and each time it re-

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stranded itself. By the time NOAA Pacific Island Regional Stranding Coordinator Dave Schofield arrived from Oahu, the whale had swum away from the beach towards Lanai.

Schofield and a few local firemen spent a few hours on jet skis attempting to herd the whale back to Molokai because it was likely injured or ill and would require their assistance.

The whale was eventually eased into the shallow waters and kept safe in a sling as Schofield waited to consult with a veterinarian from NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service who flew over from Honolulu.

"The likely outcome of this situation is that the whale will either perish or be put to sleep," said Schofield after an initial inspection of the animal.

Members of the Hawaii Pacific University's Marine Mammal Stranding Team, local NOAA volunteer Diane Pike, local aquatic biologist Bill Puleloa with the Department of Aquatic Resources, and the Department of Public Works were all at the scene to offer their help while the situation was assessed.

#### A Tough Decision

After inspecting the whale and consulting with the other specialists present, the veterinarian determined that it would have to be put down.

According to Schofield, a whale will not strand itself, especially repeatedly as this whale had done, unless it was very sick and it would most likely die no matter what help they could provide.

He also confirmed that the whale had some cookie-cutter shark marks under its belly, which had been bleeding, but they were likely incidental.

The whale was euthanized on site before being flown to Oahu by the U.S. Coastguard C-130, which was on call at the time.

#### Possible Causes

It remains unclear what could have caused the whale's illness. Blood samples were taken and an autopsy was performed in Honolulu last week to investigate.

"Whales and other marine mammals beach themselves for many reasons," said NOAA spokesperson Wendy Goo. "We don't have enough information at this time to draw any conclusions."

Puleloa, however, who has been in contact with representatives at NOAA, said preliminary results from the whale's autopsy show evidence of a congenital disease in its kidney that likely caused its illness and subsequent stranding. Unfortunately, it will take weeks, or even months, to have definitive results from the investigation.

In the meantime, some are also pointing fingers at Navy sonar testing in the area from the previous day that could have been responsible.

"Sonar is sometimes attributed to cases like this. It's definitely on the list," said Schofield.

Action was immediately taken by the national ecological law firm Earthjustice, who sent out press releases explaining how sonar exercises performed by the Navy's Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) the previous day could be related to the situation on Molokai.

"The impact of Navy sonar on marine mammals goes back more than 10 years," said Paul Achitoff, an attorney with Earthjustice who has been representing groups in litigation with the Navy to increase protections for marine mammals during sonar exercises.

He also explained how RIMPAC has been repeatedly ordered by the courts to implement mitigation in their sonar exercises, such as starting at a lower frequency so nearby whales have a chance to leave the area before ramping it up. Currently, Achitoff said, RIMPAC 2008 is not employing any of these mitigation efforts.

RIMPAC did not return any calls for comment.

#### A Marine Mammal Dilemma

To find a Cuvier's beaked whale stranded is a rare, and unfortunate, occasion. The deep-diving whale is known for being extremely shy, and is potentially more sensitive to certain types of noise than other whales.

NOAA is currently working with the U.S. military to tag some of these marine mammals in order to study their behavior during RIMPAC's sonar exercises.

The stranding on Molokai is the eighth one this year in the state of Hawaii.

Schofield said that if anyone should find a whale stranded on the island, they should not try to help the whale themselves, but should immediately contact their Marine Mammal Hotline at 1-888-256-9840.

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