

Press release

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Strandings of Whales on the North Sea Shore



Removing parasites from one of the sperm whales investigated in Schleswig-Holstein.



A total of 12 sperm whales have been found in several areas of Dutch and German waters of the North Sea.

Since 8 January 2016 a total of 12 sperm whales have been found dead or alive in several areas of Dutch and German waters of the North Sea: Six animals were found at the Dutch island of Texel, two at Wangerooge, one at Eversand between Bremerhaven and Cuxhaven, two drifting near Helgoland and one near Büsum. Five of the sperm whales stranded at Texel were alive, the other animal had already died by the time it was detected.

Without exception all animals were young male sperm whales with a body length ranging from 10 to 12.8 meters. To the extent possible, all sperm whales were examined by a veterinarian. Furthermore, numerous tissue samples were taken. The animals found at Wangerooge were hauled to Wilhelmshaven before examination. Researchers performed examinations on Texel directly on site, and animals stranded near Helgoland and Büsum were brought to Nordstrand for examination and autopsy. The University of Veterinary Medicine Hannover, Foundation (TiHo), conducts examinations of animals found on German shores together with the appropriate authorities in Schleswig-Holstein and Lower Saxony. A research team of the university, together with staff members of the state agency for coastal protection, national parks and marine protection of Schleswig-Holstein, performed necropsies of all sperm whales on Nordstrand. The researchers took numerous tissue samples of all animals, which will be investigated in collaboration with partner institutions. The animals on Texel were examined by the University of Utrecht and Imares Wageningen, with support of the local authorities. Results of the investigations conducted on sperm whales found in the Netherlands and Germany will eventually be merged.

The initial impression is that these sperm whales were healthy animals, showing no signs of injury or infectious diseases. The animals were well nourished and mostly had abundant cuttlefish beaks in their stomachs, indicating that they had recently foraged near the coast of Norway. Some of the sperm whales were found to have marine litter in their stomachs. This, however, did not appear to be the immediate cause of death. Currently, the researchers suspect that the healthy animals died as a result of the stranding process.

The sperm whales found belonged to the population indigenous to the Azores. Males of this population migrate to the feeding grounds near the Norwegian coast. The loss of these 12 stranded sperm whales is unlikely to endanger that population.

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