



## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **The Marine Mammal Center Responds to Humpback Whale at San Francisco’s Baker Beach Amid COVID-19 Pandemic**

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – April 29, 2020) – A team of scientists from The Marine Mammal Center, the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, and its partners, responded to a humpback whale that washed ashore last week on San Francisco’s Baker Beach. Due to the animal’s advanced state of decomposition, the team was unable to determine a conclusive cause of death. The Center has had to make significant changes to its whale necropsy response efforts amid the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the health and safety of its first responders while still attempting to gather critical data.

“The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted our marine mammal response capabilities as we prioritize the health of our experts to allow these invaluable investigations to safely continue,” says Dr. Pádraig Duignan, Chief Research Pathologist at The Marine Mammal Center. “Whale necropsies are critical to provide insights into the overall health of these animals and their ocean environment, including human activity that can impact them. We are committed with our partners to utilize smaller teams of experts to continue to provide data and find solutions to prevent these deaths in the future.”

The Center and its partners are currently deploying response teams with less than a third of normal personnel for shorter durations and with increased personal protective equipment to safely continue this important work. This necessary action has led to a decrease in data and sample collection during necropsies which can make it more difficult to determine why a whale stranded.

These impacts played a role in the April 21, 2020, response to a juvenile female humpback whale at San Francisco’s Baker Beach by scientists from the Center and its partners at the California Academy of Sciences. Due to the reduced staffing and the whale’s poor body condition, scientists were unable to determine the cause of death for the 37-foot whale. Experts evaluated available tissues and viable samples from the partial necropsy thoroughly over the past week prior to concluding their findings.

In recent years, blunt-force trauma from ship strikes, malnutrition and entanglements are the most common causes of death in whales The Marine Mammal Center’s research team has investigated.

During the necropsy on the beach, the team encountered a number of people not following CDC mandates for social distancing, many of whom were not wearing a mask. This is not only of particular concern because of the pandemic, but also because scientists use long, sharp knives and tools during a necropsy. It is critical for the public to maintain their distance and keep their pets away if they encounter a necropsy or marine mammal rescue in progress, for everyone’s safety.

“As we investigate why a whale has died, we ask people to please keep their distance from the whale and our response teams so they can complete as much of the necropsy as possible,” said Dr. Duignan. “This is especially important given the current shelter-in-place orders and to prevent potential disease transfer from the animal to people or their pets.”

Officials from Golden Gate National Recreation Area buried the whale's remains at Baker Beach late last week. Please report sick and injured marine mammals to The Marine Mammal Center at 415-289-SEAL (7325).

**ASSETS:** Images, b-roll, and a document with caption and credit information are available for download and media use here: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/0ppefqaic3b8vce/AACdP5n3DdCGpMc1TmRrwJm2a?dl=0>.

#### **BACKGROUND ON HUMPBACK WHALES:**

According to NOAA Fisheries, before a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1985, all populations of humpback whales were greatly reduced, some by more than 95 percent. The species is increasing in abundance in much of its range, but faces threats from entanglement in fishing gear, vessel strikes, vessel-based harassment, underwater noise and habitat impacts. According to the most recent NOAA Fisheries population estimates, approximately 2,900 humpbacks frequent the California, Oregon, Washington and southern British Columbia coasts in the summer and fall. In recent years, humpbacks have been observed more and more frequently feeding along the California coast. To learn more about The Marine Mammal Center's whale necropsy work, listen to our podcast, Sentinels of the Sea, found here: <http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/about-us/News-Room/2018-newsarchives/podcasts.html>.

#### **HOW THE PUBLIC CAN HELP:**

- Report sick and injured marine mammals to The Marine Mammal Center by calling 415-289-SEAL (7325).
- Maintain a safe distance of at least 50 feet from a stranded cetacean and keep dogs away.
- The Marine Mammal Center is a nonprofit and depends on donations from members of the public to respond to and care for marine mammals and conduct critical scientific research. Visit [MarineMammalCenter.org/donate](http://MarineMammalCenter.org/donate) to help the Center perform its life-saving work.

#### **ABOUT THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER:**

At The Marine Mammal Center, we are guided and inspired by a shared vision of a healthy ocean for marine mammals and humans alike. Our mission is to advance global ocean conservation through marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation, scientific research, and education. Since 1975, the Center has been headquartered in the Marin Headlands, Sausalito, Calif., within the Golden Gate National Parks and has rescued and treated nearly 20,000 marine mammals. In 2014, the Center opened Ke Kai Ola, a hospital dedicated to the recovery of the endangered Hawaiian monk seal, in Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i. The Marine Mammal Center is the largest marine mammal hospital and education center in the world. The Center's teaching hospital and training experts travel to work with emerging first responder teams in locations around the globe.

For more information, please visit [MarineMammalCenter.org](http://MarineMammalCenter.org). Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

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