

Whale Stranding at Everglades NP

On the afternoon of Jan. 30, 1992, an Everglades NP visitor reported a group of whales, later identified as short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrorhyncha*) attempting to strand on the remote wilderness beach of Northwest Cape. Regional, state, and local marine mammal stranding authorities were contacted for advice.

Due to the remoteness of the area, limited care facilities and a poor rehabilitation record for the species, a rescue and removal effort was not undertaken. Park Rangers responded to find 11 pilot whales stranded with one dead and three more swimming slowly offshore. The rangers attempted to refloat the whales and after a short time all were moving about in deeper water offshore. Efforts to save stranding pilot whales often prove futile because the animals restrand immediately at the same location or some time later several hundred kilometers away.

The following morning park staff conducted boat and aerial surveys of adjacent coastline, but no pilot whales were observed. Later that morning, biologists from the Florida DNR and the National Marine Fisheries Service were delivered to the site by Florida Marine Patrol helicopter to conduct a field necropsy. The animal was a 332 cm female with congested lungs and stomach ulcers. Cause of death was bacterial pneumonia.

Park staff later learned that on the morning of January 30, local fishermen had observed as many as 26 whales attempting to strand at the same location, with an undetermined number swimming in the surf around their boats. The fishermen had attempted to refloat the whales while trying to radio for assistance. Approximately a week later, three pilot whales were found stranded, two dead and one alive, south of Naples, FL, well to the north of Northwest Cape.

Pilot whale strandings, often involving 100 or more animals, are common in North America, for reasons still not known. The largest recorded U.S. stranding occurred in 1933 and involved over 200 pilot whales in what is now Everglades NP, from East Cape Sable to near Flamingo. The recent event has park staff talking with marine biologists and reviewing just what kind of intervention is appropriate for a national park.