

Beached whales could provide insight into species

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As scientists try to figure out what caused a rare beaked whale and her calf to become beached in the sands of Hollywood on Monday, some believe the incident could shed much-needed insight into the mysterious marine mammal.

Beaked whales, which typically prefer deep and cold water, are one of the lesser known type of whale within scientific circles because of their remote habitat, said Edward O. Keith, an associate professor with Nova Southeastern University's Oceanographic Center.

"Depending on what type of beaked whale this is, this could prove very interesting because it will definitely expand our knowledge into the species," he said.

Connie Barclay, a Washington, D.C.-based spokeswoman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said there may be at least 20 different species of beaked whales with vastly different characteristics and behavior.

It was not clear Monday what species the mother and calf belonged to.

The Smithsonian Institution lists 21 species of beaked whales that fall within six different genera. The mammals, distinguished mainly by their long beak-like noses similar to dolphins, are known also for being able to dive for as long as 30 minutes.

Keith, who was not involved in Monday's rescue, said it's extremely rare to see a beaked whale strand itself in Florida. But it's not completely unheard of.

A Gervais' beaked whale stranded itself last year in the shallow waters behind a home in Islamorada in the Keys. The whale was euthanized but not before U.S. Navy audiologists conducted hearing and blood tests to determine what brought it there.

The Navy wanted to study the effects of submarine sonar on marine mammals. Tests concluded that the whale had a nonfunctioning liver and failed kidneys.

In 2004, another Gervais' beaked whale stranded itself on the beach of St. Lucie Inlet State Preserve, after the juvenile was separated from its mother.

Most whale experts said Monday that beaked whales do fare poorly in captivity, and there are no facilities available for them.

Keith said there are countless reasons why any whale may beach itself. "That's been the biggest mystery of over 2,000 years," he said.

Besides illness, other factors include becoming disoriented while chasing food, or being chased by larger whales, Barclay said.

The state's more abundant pilot whale, a relative of the dolphin, is the most commonly beached whale in Florida.

Barclay said NOAA, which responds to about two beached whales per year in South Florida, keeps in touch with the U.S. Navy. However, it had no information on whether the Navy was conducting any submarine sonar operations in the area that could have interfered with the whales.

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