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Baby whale tries to suckle new boat



Abandoned whale ... locals watch as the motherless humpback passes under a wharf.

Photo: *Nick Moir*

Marian Wilkinson
August 20, 2008

The fate of the three-week-old baby humpback whale stranded in Pittwater will most likely be decided by vets from Taronga Zoo after attempts to lure it out to sea this morning failed.

The vets hope to be able to assess the health of the calf and whether it can survive. If not, the calf may have to be put down.

The North Sydney manager of the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service, Chris McIntosh, will give an update on efforts to save the whale's life soon but there are fears that, if it is too weak to survive, it may have be destroyed.

The humpback calf was first seen in the Pittwater area on Sunday apparently trying to search for its mother and nuzzling up to a yacht.

Probably ignored by whales along coast

Arjun Ramachandran reports: The whale - weak, hungry and desperate to find its mother - has probably been ignored by whales swimming along the coast who can hear its distress calls, the National Parks and Wildlife Service says.

The young calf was this morning found trying to suckle a boat at The Basin, near Palm Beach, which it had apparently mistaken for its mother.

When the whale was first spotted on Monday, it had been similarly nuzzling up to a whale-sized yacht in the Pittwater area.

National Parks and Wildlife Service spokesman John Dengate refuted reports that there were plans to euthanase the whale, but said there was very little else that could be done.

"It's absolutely the case that we haven't given up on this little whale," he said.

While NPWS had been investigated options to care for the whale in captivity, there were no facilities in Australia large enough to suckle a baby whale for its 11-month suckling period and to provide it with its nutritional needs, he said.

The whale already weighed more than a tonne, and would grow further during the 11-month period.

After that, it would need to feed on krill - a small crustacean - which would require that it be transported to the Antarctic where krill was present, he said.

All of this was "extremely difficult to do and our advice is that in Australia, and quite likely in the world, there is not facility to deal with this".

Mr Dengate also revealed that the baby whale would probably have been contacting other pods of whales travelling up and down the coast, as whales could communicate up to 10 kilometres under water.

However, it looked unlikely that the whale's mother would return or that another lactating adult whale would adopt it, he said.

Authorities had lured the baby out to sea on Monday, but it had returned to Mackerel Beach, in Pittwater, by the next morning.

This morning, a man found the whale trying to suckle on his boat at The Basin, near Palm Beach.

"I've got a baby whale suckling my boat," the man, Peter, said on 702 ABC Sydney this morning.

"I've been sailing back from Port Stephens and came in late last night and woke up this morning to a strange sucking sound at the bottom of the boat.

"It sounds quite pathetic ... like someone with a great vacuum cleaner trying to suck the bottom of the boat."

The man said he had not been aware there was a lost baby whale in the area.

He had moored his boat at The Basin while he tried to contact the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, he said.

"I just didn't want to start the boat or do anything to hurt the whale."

Mr Dengate said it was likely the whale had just days to live.

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