

ESTABLISHING A MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING NETWORK IN THE BAHAMAS

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Background

Atypical mass strandings of beaked whales have been correlated with international naval operations, raising concern that beaked whales are particularly vulnerable to naval sonar. One of these events occurred on March 15th, 2000 in the northern Bahamas during which 14 beaked whales stranded. The US Navy has two operating ranges in Bahamian waters, and following additional strandings during 2005 and 2006 near the Atlantic Undersea Testing and Evaluation Center (AUTEK), public concern has increased within the Bahamas about the impacts these operations may be having on beaked whales and other cetacean species. In light of these developments, there has been a growing need to train Bahamians to become First Responders to quickly respond to each stranding and conduct an initial examination, assist live strandings, and facilitate a more thorough investigation to determine the cause of death.

The establishment of the Bahamas Marine Mammal Stranding Network has begun this process of training and capacity building amongst Bahamians with the longer term goal to address conservation of marine mammals in the Bahamas and potential impacts of naval operations on local populations.

Objectives

- 1) To organize two workshops to train Bahamians as first responders to stranding events.
- 2) To distribute stranding kits throughout the island chain.
- 3) To establish a link with stranding networks in the US and wider Caribbean region.

Methods

The establishment of the stranding network began by creating a core team made up of individuals and organizations that had shown an interest in forming a stranding network in the Bahamas. Individuals from this group formed the Steering Committee and included the Bahamas Department of Marine Resources, the Bahamas Marine Mammal Research Organisation (BMMRO), the Bahamas National

Trust, three captive marine mammal facilities (Dolphin Encounters and Atlantis Resort's Dolphin Cay in Nassau and Dolphin Experience in Freeport), and the NOAA's Southeast Regional Stranding Center in Miami, Florida. The Steering Committee developed the initial organizational structure of the stranding network, and plans for the training workshops, i.e. choose a venue, a list of participants, invited speakers, and activities.

Two training workshops were planned with the goal of inviting participation from throughout the Bahamas, with the first scheduled for 2008 and the second for 2009. Invited speakers included experts in stranding response and necropsy procedures, with an emphasis on response to strandings of beaked whales. Invited participants included Fisheries Officers, Government and private veterinarians, Bahamas National Trust Park Rangers, veterinarians and Officers from the Bahamas Humane Society, veterinarians and trainers from the captive dolphin facilities, personnel from the US Navy's Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center (AUTEK), personnel from field research stations, and students from the Young Bahamian Marine Scientists organization. Supplies were assembled for two different types of stranding kits (large and small) to be distributed to participants who attended the workshops so they could return to their island with the equipment needed to respond to stranding events.

Results

Two 2-day marine mammal stranding workshops were held in Nassau during May 2008 and February-March 2009 with 133 participants representing 15 Bahamian islands. A stranding network for the Bahamas was created, with a 24/7 stranding hotline number manned by the Bahamian Department of Marine Resources, and an online discussion group for quick and easy information sharing. The online Google group (bahamas-marine-mammal-stranding-network@googlegroups.com) allows documents to be stored and shared; these include standardized stranding data forms, instructions on sample collection and preservation, and an

up-to-date contact tree spreadsheet that network members can edit as needed. The contact trees allow the hotline representative to reach First Responders closest to a stranding event.

Capacity building through multiple training workshops, established communication trees, stranding kits on major islands in the archipelago and a national stranding hotline will ensure more effective response during stranding events to better determine the cause of strandings as well as increase our understanding of the biology of marine mammals. The stranding network is to become self-sufficient and continue into the future with local support. Five strandings have been reported through the hotline since the Network was initiated (Blainville's beaked whale, n=1; West Indian manatee, n=3 and Clymene dolphin, n=1 (first record of this species from the Bahamas)). Information about these events was shared on the Google group which serves as an educational opportunity for Bahamians and reinforces information learned during the workshops. The successful response to these recent strandings is evidence that the Network is functioning well.

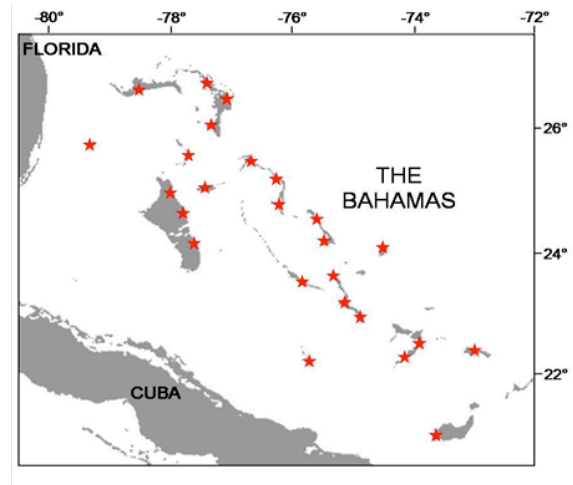


Figure 1. Map of the Bahamas showing each island that was represented at the stranding workshops by local participants. Each of these islands now has a large stranding kit and at least one small kit (depending on the size of the island). The map shows how the project has successfully trained individuals and distributed stranding kits throughout the island archipelago.