



Volunteers from the Taiwan Cetacean Society (TCS) and Taiwanese coastguard officers working to move a stranded dwarf sperm whale on Zhuangwei beach in Yilan county. AFP PIX

Back to the sea

Taiwan volunteers fight rise in whale and dolphin strandings

TAIWANESE volunteers gathered around a large inflatable whale as they learned how to help beached sea mammals — an increasingly common sight across the island.

More than 100 dolphins and whales now wash up on Taiwan's beaches every year, a sharp rise over the past decade, according to researchers.

After spotting a beached mammal, volunteers at a recent training run by the Taiwan Cetacean Society (TCS) were told not to push the mammals back into the sea, but to immediately call the coast guard with their precise location.

The coast guard works with groups like TCS in emergency operations that often include trained volunteers.

TCS secretary-general Tseng Cheng-tsung said he gradually developed "a sense of mission" after participating in multiple rescues, which

inspired him to get a master's degree in marine biology.

"Many people like to get close to nature and protect it," he said.

Saleswoman Joanna Hung, 36, joined the training after seeing "rather bloody footage" of a plastic straw being pulled out of the nose of a rescued turtle.

"If we haven't come to class, we would act on our own ideas which may cause more harm if we don't have the right knowledge," she told AFP.

"I want to try my best to help them survive."

MILITARY ACTIVITY

Taiwan began reporting an uptick of stranded animals around 2016, when 90 were found ashore, a jump from a few dozen in previous years, said Yang Wei-cheng, an expert on cetacean conservation at National Taiwan University.

He pointed to environmental changes such as the rise of sea sur-

face temperature and human activities that cause noise and other pollution as reasons for the increase.

Lindsay Porter, the vice-chair of the International Whaling Commission's scientific committee, said the highest cause of death for all cetacean species worldwide is by-catch, the accidental capture of marine life by fishing gear such as nets and fishing hooks.

"Stranding numbers may increase if fishing practises change," she said,

Many people like to get close to nature and protect it.

Tseng Cheng-tsung



A dead sea turtle being dissected to determine the cause of death at the headquarters in New Taipei City.

explaining that coastal construction projects could "cause fishing vessels to abandon those areas" and move to new spots.

Porter added that increasing underwater noise, such as from marine military activity, could also be a factor.

"Noise levels associated with marine military activity can be particularly loud and intense and have been shown elsewhere to cause mortality as well as hearing impairment in cetaceans," she said.

In recent years, Taiwan has seen a significant increase in military activity from China — which considers the democratic island as part of its terri-

tory — as Beijing regularly sends in naval vessels, fighter jets, and drones to press its claims.

While the causes of Taiwan's strandings remain unclear, Porter said the data gathered on the island was genuine rather than an increase in reporting frequency.

Weather could also be a factor. After Typhoon Gaemi hit Taiwan in late July, 15 dolphins, whales and turtles washed up on beaches across the island in just two weeks, according to data from TCS.

Usually, less than 10 beached mammals are reported every month between June and September, TCS said.



Covering a stranded dwarf sperm whale with a wet cloth to keep it moist.

COMMUNITY RESCUE

Two days after Typhoon Gaemi made landfall in Taiwan, a beached dwarf sperm whale was found on the shores of northeastern Yilan county.

The mammal was still breathing when TCS vets worked quickly to move it on a tarp as volunteers poured water over it. But when they tried to move the animal using an excavator, it died.

Transporting it "caused it quite a bit of stress so it held its breath for more than 10 minutes and died", said Hsiao Shun-ting, the vet on scene.

According to TCS, the majority of the stranded cetaceans in Taiwan die — either because they were already sick when they were beached or from the stress of returning them to the ocean.

"People often ask us this question... Is it worth it?" marine biologist Tseng said.

But he said the wins were unforgettable — such as when a beached 400 kilogramme false killer whale was released back into the ocean.

The operation to save the 3.15-metre creature took nine days and cost more than US\$6,000, Tseng said.

More than 500 volunteers and 100 civil servants helped out.

He hoped that those who attended the training would pass the love and knowledge of sea animals on to their friends and families.

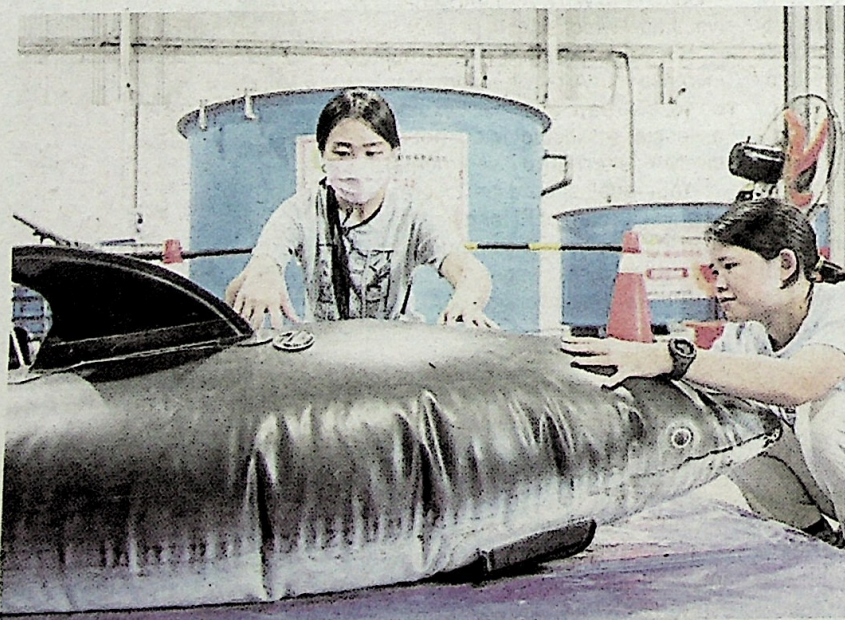
"I think these people will slowly influence others around them... and help move Taiwan's marine conservation work forward," he said. **AFP**



(Left) TCS secretary-general Tseng Cheng-tsung talking about the increasing number of stranded aquatic mammals in Taiwan.



Volunteers helping to measure the heart beats of a stranded dwarf sperm whale on Zhuangwei beach in Yilan.



TCS deputy secretary-general Wu En-Hua (left) demonstrating rescue techniques using an inflatable whale.



Whale bones on display at the headquarters of the Taiwan Cetacean Society.