

Task force to deal with stranded marine mammals

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KOTA KINABALU: The Borneo Marine Research Institute of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) has identified a task force as well as planning to develop a standard operating manual to deal with stranded marine mammals.

Borneo Marine Research Institute director Professor Dr Saleem Mustafa said the institute also intended to hold a meeting with other state agencies regarding this matter in the near future.

"We decided to come up with a standard operating manual to deal with stranded whales, such as how to push them back to the sea and keep them alive because once they come out of the water, they suffer dehydration and become dry and stressed," he said at a press conference at the university yesterday.

He added that among the members of the task force are lecturers at the institute, Dr John Madin and Dr Julian Ransangan.

"The whole idea for a task force is to have access or permission to undertake investigation that is required to handle the animal, remove the contents of its stomach, and examine some of its internal organs for a comprehensive scientific study," he said.

A Baleen whale was found stranded on a beach at Setompok River near Kuala Penyu on August 2, but the mammal died 12 hours later despite efforts to help it move to deeper water and keeping it cool. The whale measured 15.8 metres in length and over 10 tonnes in weight.

The body of the stranded whale was towed to a nearby jetty around 2pm on August 3, and displayed to the public prior to its



Symmetrical coloration and lack of white chevrons on the head of the whale resembled the description for Bryde's whale.

burial.

Saleem said an action plan should be ready because it would determine which parts of the mammal's body to be sprayed with water, the pressure of the water, how to help the mammal get into deeper water and how it should be pushed.

While rescuing efforts is underway, the whale needs to be inspected to identify its species, gender and for any injuries.

He said the task force would require the cooperation of many agencies in Sabah as one could not claim custody of an animal for scientific investigation without permission.

The Bryde's whales are known to have the widest distribution range among the members of Balaenopteridae.

Based on available record, the mammal is reported to have been distributed over an area of more than 350 million km², primarily along tropical and subtropical waters.

Stranding of whales, especially the Bryde's, is not new to Sabah since it had been reported several times in the past.

However, in many cases, efforts to rescue stranded whales have often been unsuccessful, and many of the animals die due to dehydration, internal injuries due to inability to support heavy body when out of the water and drowning when the blowholes are completely covered with water for an extended duration during high tide.

Saleem further said observations done by UMS scientists suggested that the stranded whale was of the Bryde species in the Balaenopteridae family.

However, tissue samples had been collected for DNA analysis in order not to confuse with other species of the same family. The process, which is expected to take a month to complete, will be conducted at Microbiology and Fish Disease Laboratory at the Borneo Marine Research Institute.

The task force can be reached at 088-320121 or email bmru@ums.edu.my for technical matters.

Also present were lecturer Muhammad Ali Syed Hussein and science officer Syuhaimie Ahmad Ali.