THE LITTLEST WHALE in the ocean

What is the largest creature on earth? The blue whale. It's a fact that everyone knows. But have you ever heard of the pygmy right whale? At one-fifth the size of its giant cousin, this little mammal is enigmatic, rarely seen and of unknown status. Marine biologist **Ruth H. Leeney** encountered a female of the species washed up at Walvis Bay in Namibia and helped it return to the sea. 'It was surreal,' she says of the experince she shares with us here.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY
RUTH H. LEENEY

The great whales. We know them as leviathans, the largest creatures in the sea and indeed on earth. The biggest of them all, the blue whale, can reach 30-plus metres in length, far larger than any dinosaur ever was. Less constrained in their watery world by the forces of gravity, they grow to massive proportions. When a blue whale surfaces to breathe, its blow, the visible column of water vapour that it exhales, is so tall that it seems to connect the heavens to the sea. Blue whales cannot go unnoticed, which perhaps is why they were targeted so much by whalers in centuries past.

At the other end of the scale is the pygmy right whale, which may reach just over six metres when fully grown. Not quite pocket-sized but nonetheless the world's smallest baleen whale, this shy creature probably lives in the deeper offshore waters of the southern hemisphere and has rarely been encountered at sea. Very little is known about the species and few people have even heard of it, making it all the more intriguing.

Located centrally on Namibia's coast, Walvis Bay is a large bay about 10 kilometres across that offers excellent protection from the wild winds and heaving swell characterising this coastline. The inlet is closed off from the Atlantic Ocean on its western side by a long sand spit called Pelican Point. In the inner bay, a shallow lagoon is frequented by myriad seabirds and waders. Inland from the lagoon is a patchwork of salt pans into which seawater is pumped and

left to evaporate, leaving salt crystals sparkling in the sunshine. The bay itself is home to bottlenose and Heaviside's dolphins, while humpback and southern right whales visit seasonally.

Walvis Bay has long been the site of cetacean (whale and dolphin) strandings and the local community has for as long been involved in 'refloating' the animals. In 2008, these efforts were coordinated and the Namibian Strandings Network was born. Not only has the network worked on a number of rescues in the past five years, it also facilitates the collection of information from both live and dead strandings, helping to build a better understanding of Namibia's marine life.

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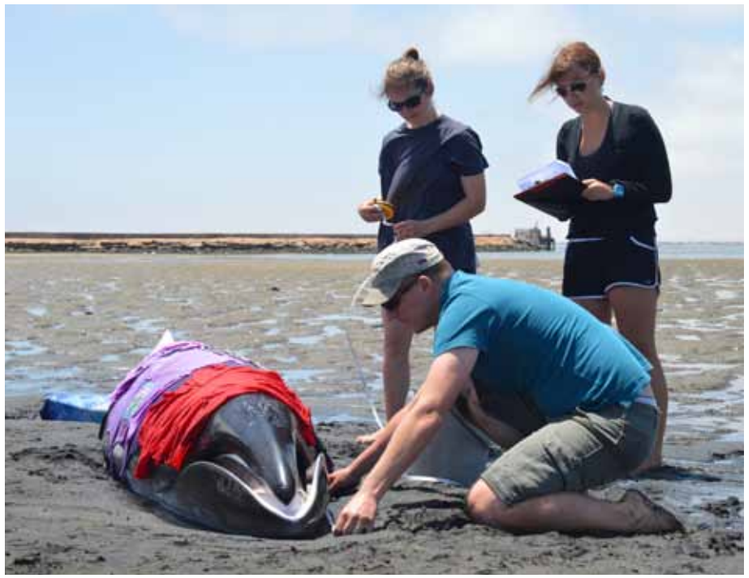
In 2012, I decided to gather all the records of pygmy right whale sightings in Namibia. There is a surprisingly high number, which seemed significant given that most of the research on pygmy right whales has been based on strandings and several sightings from Australasia. Together, these records have provided the first overview of this diminutive cetacean in Namibian waters and represent a significant proportion of all the data about pygmy right whales in the Atlantic Ocean.

Since 1978, I discovered, 11 pygmy right whales (some alive, others newly dead) have been stranded here and the skeletal remains of at least eight other individuals have been found. The majority of the remains and all of the strandings occurred in Walvis Bay. Two of the dead whales were six-plus metres in length; the others found on the shore were juvenile animals between 3.2 and 3.7 metres, meaning that they had probably not yet been weaned. All of the live strandings that had been dated occurred during the austral summer, between November and March. This might suggest that pygmy right whales are only in Namibian waters during this period, or perhaps only come close to shore in those months.



OPPOSITE In February this year, this pygmy whale became stranded on the mudflats that line the shore of Walvis Bay, Namibia.

ABOVE Protecting the whale from the elements, the Namibian Strandings Network team takes the opportunity to gather some vital statistics about this marine mammal.

Compiling this limited information actually raised far more questions than it answered. Why do so many very young animals strand in this area? Could Walvis Bay, or the waters just offshore, act as a nursery ground for young whales? Do pygmy right whales regularly inhabit Namibian coastal or offshore waters? If so, what impact might burgeoning offshore oil and gas exploration activities have on them?

It is strange to piece together clues of a species' habits and ecology from bones, skull fragments and the shadows of those whales whose navigation skills let them down. The records I was studying did not refer to extinct animals, but described a living – albeit rare – species that inhabits the coast where I live. Yet all I had ever seen of pygmy right whales was several skulls and a skeleton.

And then, as if to bring the whole narrative to life, the Strandings Network received a call. Late on the morning of St Valentine's Day 2013, as he left the saltworks' pump station, a local worker noticed a dark grey, cigar-shaped form lying on the mud. The message filtered through to the network and soon I was stuffing the essentials – camera, wetsuit, water, old sheets and towels, sunscreen and a jacket – into a bag. I joined the other members and we headed towards the site.

The rough road through the pans was lined with greater and lesser flamingos, glossy white pelicans and scurrying speckled waders. The whale lay a good 100 metres from the water's edge, bedecked in a patched-together jacket of red, purple, black and white that seemed ironically jaunty and carefree. Beneath the wet rags draped on the animal – a female – to protect her from the sun and wind, she had some scrapes from her encounter with solid ground. Her body seemed to be sculpted from polished marble. Dark charcoal grey on the top and sides fading to smoky grey at the edges of her white belly, her contours smooth and streamlined, she appeared forlorn in this unglamorous scene. The pectoral fin on each side of her body was tucked beneath her, giving the impression of a perfectly hydrodynamic submarine.

It was not long after low tide when we arrived, and the water's edge was too far away for us to attempt to carry the whale. While we waited for the tide to rise, our most pressing task was to protect her from the sun and rising wind. We covered her ▸

with the extra towels I had brought and set up a tarpaulin as a windbreak. Some of the team fetched buckets of seawater to keep her skin wet and cool; others took measurements and photographs, using the opportunity to collect as much information as possible. We became absorbed by the details of her anatomy – the tiny bristles in dimples along her lower jaw; the oval scars resulting from cookie-cutter shark bites; the bright white baleen plates edged with black; and the strongly arched lower jaw.

At 16h00 the incoming tide suddenly pooled around our feet and we clambered into our wetsuits. We manoeuvred the miniature whale onto the stretcher designed for dolphins and soon we were heaving and sliding the animal down the mudflats towards the water. A whale that has been stranded for many hours is stiff as well as stressed and is not always immediately able to swim out to sea. We walked her into deeper water, the afternoon wind creating chop on the surface and drenching us all. At first the whale was quite still, then slowly her tail started to pulse. We dropped the stretcher beneath her body and a few of us supported her girth with our arms. She started to breathe more often, then kicked her tail and swam away into the grey-green water. She surfaced to breathe, her head and back barely showing among the whitecaps, and then disappeared from sight.

Back on the mudflats, we shivered, waited and watched in all directions, hoping that she would not turn and head to the land again, as disoriented whales sometimes do.

A stranding can be a surreal and sometimes remarkably unemotional experience. Afterwards, I reflected on what had happened. How did the little whale perceive us as she lay uncomfortably out of her element? On at least two occasions she had made a sound, a deep, pulsing *boom* that I felt through the soles of my feet as much as I heard it. What did that call mean, and why did she not make it more often? And of course, and most pertinent – did she make it back around Pelican Point and into the deep, cold Atlantic Ocean?

Despite centuries of human exploration and exploitation of the seas, pygmy right whales have kept their habits and behaviours well hidden. This little visitor afforded me a unique encounter with a creature that is seldom seen alive, which makes her a 'great' whale in my eyes. Whether, in the future, we can uncover more about this enigmatic inhabitant of Namibia's seas remains to be seen.

ABOVE Cloths draping the whale were kept wet to protect her skin from the wind and heat.

BELOW The team walks the stressed animal into deeper water, waiting for her to swim off.

NAUDE DREYER

Focusing on cetaceans

Ruth Leeney is a co-founder of the Namibian Dolphin Project and a co-ordinator of the Namibian Strandings Network. She volunteers her time for both, fitting it in with her work as a researcher in West Africa, a writer and a yoga teacher. Her blog West African Cetaceans (*westafricacetaceans.blogspot.com*) details her research on marine wildlife, conservation and coastal cultures in the region.

Leeney's work in Namibia was funded by the Rufford Small Grants Foundation and the Mohammed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund. Full details of all pygmy right whale strandings in Namibia have now been published: Leeney, R.H. et al. 2013. Pygmy right whale records from Namibia. *African Journal of Marine Science* 35 (1): 133–139.