

## Save the Whales?

*T. E. Stazyk*

Detective Senior Sergeant Allan Davies surveyed the scene on Sanders Beach. He had seen less emotion at school bus crashes. And fewer crisis counsellors.

Strewn across the beach were sixty-three pilot whales that had beached themselves here along the Tasmanian shore. He watched the volunteers who seemed to have materialized overnight from everywhere. They were a very mixed lot. Mothers with children, retirees, young European and American tourists, locals and a few veterinarians and scientists. "No Japanese," Davies mused to himself.

Dr. Kyle Francis, a professor of marine biology, had flown in from the University of Melbourne. He was a veteran of many beaching incidents and was attempting to organize some sort of strategy. He had briefed the local authorities, "What we want to do is keep the creatures comfortable and alive if possible until they can be refloated at high tide, or hauled carefully back to the water. We'll need tractors and heavy cables and slings. That sort of thing." He asked the chief engineer of the local municipality to make necessary arrangements and asked Sergeant Davies to try to do something about crowd control. "This always happens. You have people, well meaning, mind you, coming down and getting in the way. I'll try to put some of them to work but please try to deter onlookers."

"I'll put patrols up along the roads and we'll see what we can do. How does this sort of thing happen, professor?" the sergeant asked, indicating the beached whales with a sweep of his arm.

"No one knows for sure. My personal belief is that climate changes like El Nino that change the temperatures of ocean currents, make the whales' food supply move around. You know they mostly eat microscopic plankton. When the plankton move close to shore, and especially long sloping

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shorelines like we have here, I think the whales' sonar becomes confused and they just run up on the beach. If they come up as the tide is going out they can be stranded."

"I thought they were supposed to be so smart."

"They are. In fact that's what gets them into real trouble. When one gets stuck he sends out distress calls. The other members of the pod rush in to see if they can help and they get stuck, too. It's really sad."

"I guess it's nature's way of keeping things in balance," said Davies.

"Don't say that too loud around here," said Francis. "A lot of these people think it's very unnatural for this to happen. They have all sorts of theories. Of course, pollution and toxins get a lot of blame. Some people think that noise pollution is the culprit. You know, submarines with their sonar. All the blasting and drilling that goes on with oil exploration."

"But how could noise bother them?"

"One theory is that it affects their own sonar. Another idea is that it might cause internal bleeding. Some guys did an experiment that showed that whales exposed to certain sound waves could not store nitrogen in their blood as efficiently as they should. As a result when they dive deep and come up they get something very much like humans get when they don't decompress properly. We call it the bends. When you get the bends, you get disoriented. It may be true. The types of whales that beach most are ones who dive deepest. And beachings have often been associated with naval exercises in the area."

"Seems hard to believe it could be that simple."

"Well, it's hardly a simple process. And think about it. The solution isn't so simple either. You know, deep down in the ocean, there's probably not a lot of noise and some of these creatures may just not be built to take loud noises. Plus remember that under water, sound travels farther. A lot of beached whales show internal bleeding, but no one knows if it's the cause of the beaching or the result of the stress of the beaching. But as I say, there are

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a lot of other theories. The wildest one is something called dilated cardiomyopathy.”

“Excuse me?”

“It is a problem with the heart. You know how sometimes young football players just drop dead? That’s the cause. Heart malfunction because of enlargement and weakening of the heart. They think it’s genetic but there are also theories that it might be brought about by exposure to toxins and pollutants. They’ve done autopsies on beached whales and found a surprisingly large number have heart problems. Again, who knows? Maybe all whales have the problem and we just happen to see it when they beach. Maybe there was something the whales used to eat to protect them but it’s been made extinct due to pollution.”

“That’s all very interesting, but it doesn’t help us with our immediate problem,” said Davies, gesturing again to the whales scattered on the beach. Volunteers were moving among them. A school bus full of children pulled up and their teacher announced that the children wanted to help with the rescue efforts.

“Please see what you can do about that,” said Francis.

Davies left to set up patrols set on the roads leading to the beach to divert people away. But it was easier said than done. Curiosity or a desire to help led most people to ignore the police, abandon their cars and run down to help the whales.

Dr. Francis started to organize the volunteers. He briefed them in small groups, showing them how to work together to rock the huge mammals. Most of them were too emotionally overwrought to pay attention and several kept insisting that they not waste time that could be spent “comforting” the whales. Dr. Francis persisted. He told the groups that one of the biggest problems rescuers had was that refloated whales often immediately turned around and beached themselves again. It was heartbreaking for the rescuers and some scientists thought that while on the beach the whales lost their balance and became disoriented, causing them to

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mistakenly swim back on to the beach. Scientists thought that rocking the whales might help them regain their balance so that when they are refloated they can swim straight. At least it gave the volunteers something to do.

Dr. Francis had spent his career studying whales and he loved and respected them. But even he had trouble suppressing cynical humor over the behavior of some of the volunteers. Some were sobbing hysterically, others were singing to the whales as they rocked them. Some spoke baby talk to them. Maybe he was too clinical but he could never quite understand what made people get so emotional and excited about whales. Especially when you considered the smell that even a freshening sea breeze couldn't disperse. Some of the volunteers had spent all night in the cold water rocking and soothing the big mammals.

He looked up from the group of volunteers he had been addressing as hysterical shrieks drowned out the other noises. A volunteer in the arms of a crisis counsellor was having a bad time of it. She had witnessed a whale her team had successfully refloated turn and promptly beach itself again. Weakened by the efforts it quickly died before it could be pushed back out to sea. Francis shook his head. Sometimes it seemed as if the whales purposely came back to the beach. It was as if they didn't want to be rescued.

The woman quieted down as another group of volunteers noisily organized a bucket brigade to keep the whales wet. Francis suppressed a smile at the earnest seriousness on the faces of the people as they passed the buckets, spilling most of the contents in their haste to get the water to the whales. Minutes later a backhoe rumbled onto the beach and began digging trenches around the whales. Volunteers hoped to fill the trenches with water until the tide came back in. Francis shook his head. "How is that supposed to work?" he wondered to himself.

Dr. Francis excused himself as he saw Sergeant Davies running toward him. "What is it Sergeant?" he asked when Davies reached him.

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“What should I do about that?” he asked, pointing to a group of about twenty people slowly processing along the beach. “It’s a local minister and some of his people. They want to pray over the dead whales.”

Francis looked at him, “Pray?”

“That’s what he said. I told him to shove off because we couldn’t have crowds getting in the way. He wouldn’t listen.”

Francis shrugged. “Let them be. It’s not worth it to hassle them. You know, sergeant, I think first the whales go crazy and then the humans follow.”

“I’m no professor, but I kind of figured that out a while ago.”

Further down the beach cheers and yells rang out. “God, that’s beautiful.” “Go, Jonah, go!” “I love you baby!”

Francis and Davies saw that the volunteers had succeeded in refloating three whales and they were heading out to sea. Francis found himself unconsciously urging them on. Suddenly, all three of them slowed and seemed to be communicating. In a move that appeared choreographed they all pivoted and promptly headed back to the shore where they beached again. Frenzied volunteers screamed and wept and pounded the sand. Moans and cries of grief echoed along the beach.

“Damnedest thing I ever saw,” muttered Davies. “It’s like they did it on purpose.”

“You know what we have to do now, don’t you?”

“No, what?”

“There’s no hope for those three. The best thing we can do is get a high powered rifle and put them out of their misery.”

“What? In front of that crowd. They’ll put *me* out of *their* misery.”

“It’s standard practice. We know once they rebeach, that’s it. They’re just too exhausted to go on. It’s the best thing.”

“It might be but I don’t want those people turning into a lynch mob. Besides, I don’t know where to shoot a whale.”

“Then I’ll do it. Just get me a powerful rifle.”

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"I hope you know what you are doing. Come with me."

Together they walked back to Davies's car. The radio was on and a constant stream of messages and static could be heard. As Davies unlocked his rifle Francis listened to the chatter. The message caught Davies's attention as well. About one hundred miles north, a pod of whales had been spotted. Their behavior indicated that they might be in danger of beaching and a group of volunteers assembled a flotilla of boats to keep the whales from the shore. It had seemed to work as the pod swam off. But they simply moved a mile or so away and promptly turned to the shore and beached. They had outrun the rescue boats and the volunteers could only stand by and watch.

"I'm telling you, doctor," said Davies, "they're doing it on purpose. It's like the opposite of lemmings."

"Interesting comment," was all Francis said. Suddenly he jerked to attention, "Hold on a minute." Davies's observation had triggered something in his memory. He excused himself and pulled out his cell phone and started making a call to his office. His assistant answered.

"Sharon, it's Kyle."

"How's it going out there? You're all over the news."

"Just what I need. It's a mess out here."

"What can I do for you?"

"Can you get me the name and number of that psychiatrist I worked with on that murder trial a couple of years ago? You remember the one where that lady was supposed to have killed those people at the whale beaching in New Zealand?"

"Oh yes, I remember. But I'll have to dig out the details. Can I call you right back?"

"Sure."

Francis hung up and waited. Davies had the rifle and motioned toward the three whales with a questioning look.

"Not just now. I need information."

"Information about what?"

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“I don’t know if you remember. A couple of years back there was a beaching incident in New Zealand. It was the same scene, volunteers trying to help and the whole thing. Some lady showed up tried to stop people from helping the whales. Two volunteers fell off a cliff and they arrested the lady for murder. The story was she pushed them. She’s in a psychiatric prison now but during her trial she claimed that she had to stop the volunteers because they were interfering with the whales. She said they should be allowed to beach because that’s what they are supposed to do. Something about whales having the ability to protect humans from natural and environmental disasters. But they can only protect humans by sacrificing themselves.”

“That’s definitely a new one.”

“Yeah. I got involved because at the trial they wanted to present a lot of information about how emotional people get when whales are involved and they wanted me to talk about my experiences.” Francis nodded at the weeping and singing volunteers on the beach.

“So what happened?”

“I don’t remember all the details. She was found guilty but crazy. The prosecutor didn’t think she was crazy and he asked me a lot of questions about whale behavior but I never heard anything more.”

“Another crim trying to get off on insanity. Happens all the time.”

“Well, as I recall, her story made a lot of people think she was nuts. And it was your comment about lemmings that reminded me of it.”

“How’s that?”

“That’s what I’m vague on. She didn’t claim that she could talk to the whales or anything like that, but she swore she had access to information and knowledge that we shared with whales. Something like that. The bottom line was that she thought the whales should be allowed to die because they were sacrificing themselves on purpose and if we didn’t let them sacrifice themselves, bad things would happen to us.”

“Oh?”

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“Yeah. Her story was that the reason people love whales is because they are closely linked with humans and are something like the embodiment of angels. According to her, the whales can help protect humans from natural disasters. They can sense when a disaster is going to occur and sacrifice themselves to either minimize or cancel out its effect. Don’t ask me how, but that’s her theory. The reason they beach is because it’s the only way they can kill themselves, if you think about it.”

“I get it. So saving the beached whales is the worst thing we can do?”

“That’s the idea. She had some interesting statistics that relate whale beaching incidents and earthquakes and volcanoes and typhoons.”

“Well, she sounds crazy to me.”

“The case turned on a lot of legal mumbo jumbo about knowing right from wrong. She’s in a hospital, as I say.”

“So do we shoot those whales or not?”

“Who knows? She said that humans shouldn’t interfere in any way.”

“And you’re going to run this operation on that basis?”

“Well, it’s not like there’s anything to run. Tell you what . . .”

Francis’s cell phone rang and it was Sharon with the details. She put him through to the psychiatrist with the Auckland Police, Dr. Frank Carter, who vaguely remembered him. Francis told Carter that he was interested in any current information on the woman. Had she been saying anything lately? What sort of treatment was she getting?

“You know, professor, I never thought the woman, Mrs. Eliason is her name, had any sort of clinical mental disorder. I think she is rational and firmly believes what she says. She continues to gather data and produce statistics which she believes support her theory, but no one takes her seriously.”

“Sounds like some of my colleagues.”

“Definitely. But why the sudden interest?”

“You might think *I’m* going crazy, but I’m down in Tasmania at a mass beaching and some of the things I’m seeing are making me wonder.”

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“Wonder? About what?”

“I’ve never put it together before, but when you watch what these whales do, you can convince yourself that they are suicidal. When we refloat them, they almost always come right back and beach. The theory is that they are disoriented but today I’ve watched several come back and they do not show any signs of confusion. It looks like purposeful and deliberate behavior.”

“When you wrap things up down there, why don’t you come over to Auckland and talk about this in more detail. There are some people you might want to talk to and you can meet Mrs. Eliason in the hospital if you like. It might give you some more insights.”

“Thanks. I’d like that. You don’t seemed surprised about what I’m saying.”

“I’m not. I told you that I didn’t think she was crazy, but her lawyers convinced the judge otherwise and I’m also pretty sure she pushed those people. She sends me the results of her research and has put me in touch with other people who are observing, shall we say, phenomena. I’m starting to think that a lot of what she says makes sense.”

“What sorts of phenomena?”

“Every six months she sends me a chart showing numbers of whales beached and the number rescued. It’s widely available information.”

“I know.”

“Then she correlates it with disasters in the same general area. The statistical correlation is amazingly high. She even relates the percentage of whales saved to the magnitude of the disaster.”

“What?”

“You know she thinks that we shouldn’t interfere with the whales. She thinks that if we do they can’t protect the humans from natural disasters. Sure enough, the worst earthquakes, floods and other disasters take place within a month and within a few thousand kilometers of the places where a significant percentage of the beached whales have been rescued. I can show

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it to you when we meet. Or I can send it to you if you like. Also, you might want to do a little research on a little known holiday. On December 10, the Inuit people of Alaska have a holiday called the Festival for the Souls of Dead Whales. Apparently, almost seventy per cent of their diet consists of whale meat. If it weren't for the whales, they couldn't exist in that environment."

"So they're bad guys. Whale killers."

"At one level, yes. But Mrs. Eliason researched them. They have a relationship with the whales that is practically communal. The hunts are highly ritualized and, according to some, partly orchestrated by the whales themselves. I think they whales have found another way to sacrifice themselves. They are happy and the Inuit are happy. The Inuit claim that they can communicate with the spirits of the whales and their rituals are all designed to show respect for the whales and most importantly to give them thanks for the wonderful things they provide. Have a look at the ceremony. Only a small part of the thanks relates to providing food. The rest is about protection. Now some people say that is the same as protection from starvation and that sort of thing. But they make specific references to natural disasters and storms and things like that."

"Interesting."

"The more you look, the more interesting it gets. They think that the spirit of the dead whale actually lives among the community for some period of time. Then it returns to update the other whales on what is happening and how the people cared for the spirit. And, doctor, that is only one small group of people. Globally there are unbelievable stories and legends and cults having to do with whales. No one has ever put it all together."

"I'd love to come over and see you to talk more about this. Of course it doesn't help with the current situation. It's just that I remembered some of the things from Mrs. Eliason's case while looking at what's going on."

"Sounds like you have your hands full over there. You've been on the news."

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“Yes, they don’t get any easier. And it’s funny. This time there was an unusual phenomenon. A dolphin also beached along with the whales.”

“Really? A dolphin? You’re kidding.”

“Yes, why?”

“Mrs. Eliason predicted that. She says that dolphins are next down the line from whales and when there aren’t enough whales to make a sacrifice the dolphins will join in.”

“Oh my God.”

“She’d tell you it all makes sense.”

“This is getting more interesting by the minute. I’m pretty well tied up until after the first of the year, how about if we try to meet in mid January?”

“That should be fine. Just give me a few dates when you get a chance and we’ll go from there.”

“Thanks.”

“Cheers.”

Dr. Francis again met with the local authorities and Sergeant Davies. They agreed to keep the beach area as restricted as possible and to limit activities to burying dead whales. When he left for home, they had buried a dolphin, ninety-six whales and refloated only two whales successfully.

Francis thought of Mrs. Eliason a few days later when a minor earthquake occurred off the east coast of Tasmania. It was not widely reported because it had been very small and there was no property damage or injuries. “Just a coincidence,” he told himself.

On January 17, 2005 Dr. Francis met Dr. Frank Carter in his office in Auckland. They shook hands and exchanged greetings. Dr. Carter picked up two articles and showed them to Dr. Francis. The first was a newspaper account dated December 14, 2004, celebrating the efforts of the people of Onslow in northwestern Australia on the Indian Ocean, near Indonesia. A large number of whales and dolphins had beached over a three-day period and the local people had successfully refloated every whale and dolphin.

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When Francis had finished reading it, Carter handed him the second article. The headline read "Indian Ocean Tsunami Toll Exceeds 200,000."

"What else did you want to talk about?" Carter asked Francis.