

# THESE WHALES DESERVED BETTER



## An Analysis of the January 2026 Farewell Spit Stranding

*What Went Wrong and What Could Have Been Different*

**by StrandedNoMore**

**42 Refloated. 11 Shot in the Head.**

*Was this the best we could do?*



January 2026  
[strandednomore.org](http://strandednomore.org)

## 1. Honoring the Loss

In early January 2026, approximately 55 long-finned pilot whales stranded at Farewell Spit, New Zealand. Over the following days, hundreds of volunteers worked tirelessly alongside Department of Conservation (DOC) staff and Project Jonah medics, standing in cold water, keeping whales cool, attempting refloats during high tides.

Their dedication was genuine, their exhaustion was real, and their grief when 11 whales were ultimately euthanized was heartfelt.

This report is not an attack on those volunteers. It is a tribute to the whales they tried to save, and a question: Could we have done better?

## 1.1 What the Public Saw

Analysis of 261 public comments on Project Jonah's Facebook post reveals an overwhelmingly supportive response:

Sentiment	Percentage
Supportive	49.8%
Neutral	36.4%
Critical	13.8%

The dominant emotions expressed were gratitude (101 instances), sadness (101 instances), and admiration (88 instances). The public praised the effort, mourned the loss, and moved on.



Figure 1: Word cloud of public comments showing dominant themes

## 1.2 The Uncomfortable Question

But beneath the gratitude lies an uncomfortable truth: 11 whales were shot in the head after days of being dragged back and forth, stressed, exhausted, and ultimately deemed unsaveable. The same whales volunteers had named, tended to, and bonded with.

Is this really success? Or have we simply learned to accept failure as inevitable?

## 2. What Actually Happened: A Timeline

The official narrative presents this stranding as a tragic natural event where responders did everything possible. A closer examination of the timeline reveals missed opportunities for prevention.

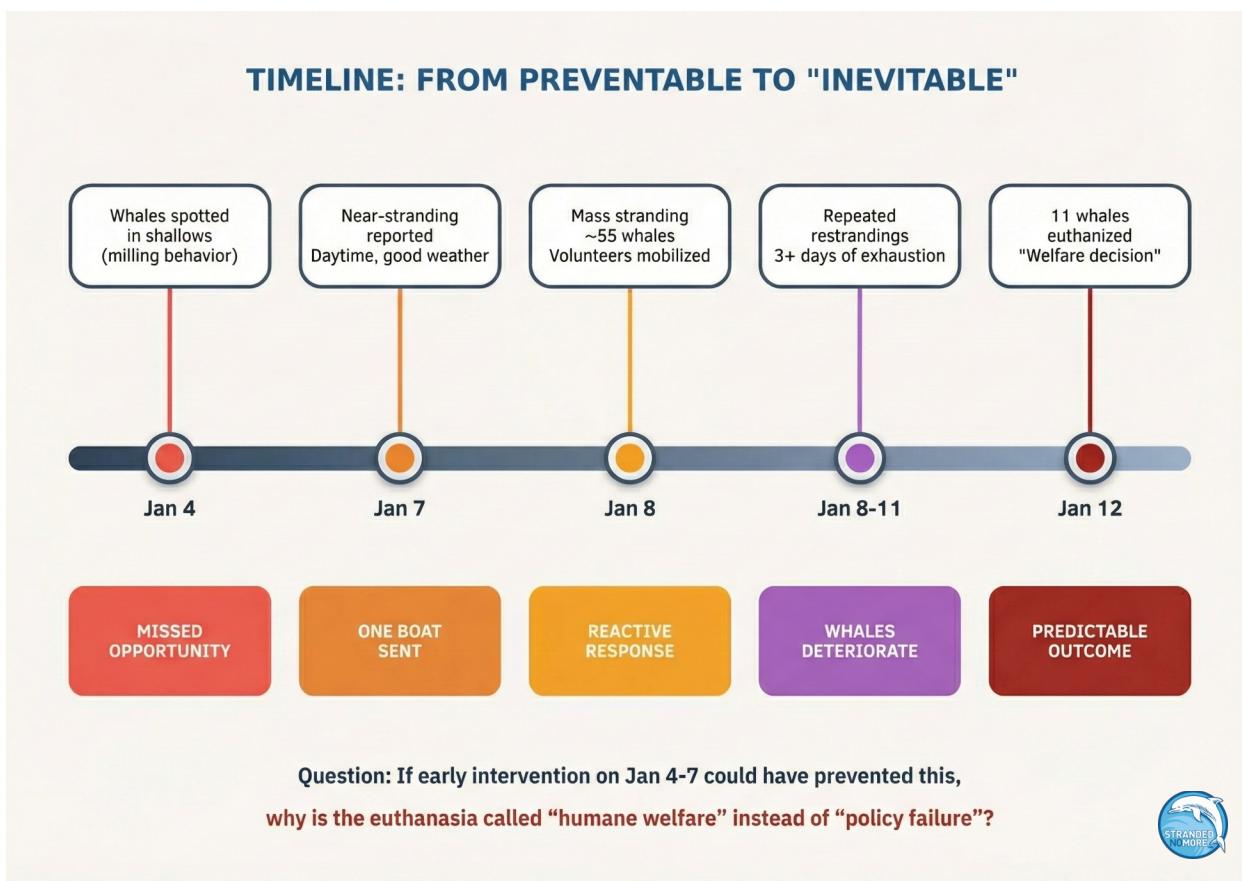


Figure 2: Timeline from first sighting to euthanasia

## **2.1 January 4th: The First Warning**

The whales were first spotted exhibiting well-known pre-stranding milling behavior offshore. This is a recognized warning sign that experienced observers understand. At this point, the whales were still in deeper water.

What happened: Nothing. No boats were mobilized to herd them away from the dangerous shallows.

## **2.2 January 7th: The Second Chance**

A near-stranding was reported, it was daytime and the weather was good, meaning that the overall conditions were favorable for intervention.

What happened: One boat was sent to "dissuade" the whales and an alert was issued to volunteers. After that, the responders waited for the stranding to occur.

## **2.3 January 8th-11th: The Exhausting Cycle**

Over the next several days, the pattern repeated: whales strand, volunteers mobilize, whales are refloated at high tide, whales restrand. Each cycle further exhausted both whales and humans.

Some whales (approximately 42) eventually stayed in deeper water. Others kept returning. Eventually, after five restrandings, the remaining 11 were deemed too stressed and fatigued to survive.

## **2.4 January 12th: The "Humane" Decision**

Veterinary assessment concluded the surviving whales were suffering. Euthanasia was carried out via gunshot to the head and officials called it "the most humane option."

But here is the question no one seems to be asking: If these whales were euthanized because they were too exhausted and stressed to survive, who exhausted them?

## **3. The Framing Problem: Welfare vs. Reality**

The official framing presents euthanasia as a welfare decision, a compassionate endpoint for suffering animals. In general, this framing is not wrong, but it is incomplete.

## THE EUTHANASIA FRAMING: WELFARE vs. REALITY

*Or the predictable outcome of inadequate prevention and exhausting protocols?*

### OFFICIAL FRAMING

- Humane welfare decision
- Most compassionate option
- End their suffering
- Science-based assessment
- Weather unsuitable for refloat

→ Absolves responsibility



### REALITY

- End result of failed policy
- Jan 4th warning ignored
- No early herding intervention
- 3+ days of exhausting whales
- Repeated restrandings predicted

→ Preventable deaths



## 11 whales shot in the head = "welfare"?

*Or the predictable outcome of inadequate prevention and exhausting protocols?*



Figure 3: Two ways to frame the same outcome

Consider the logic:

- Whales strand because early intervention did not prevent it
- Whales are subjected to days of stressful refloating attempts
- Whales become too exhausted and stressed to survive
- Whales are euthanized because they are suffering
- Euthanasia is framed as "humane welfare decision"

This framing absolves the system of responsibility, since the suffering that justified the killing was itself caused by the inadequate response. **But by calling the endpoint "humane," we avoid examining how we got there.**

### 3.1 What Comments Reveal

Public comments consistently accept this framing:

"It was a humane decision. Thank you."

"At least they are not suffering anymore."

"The kindest thing to do, and it's not like you didn't try."

The public has been conditioned to see euthanasia as mercy rather than as evidence of systemic failure. When 11 whales are shot in the head, we say "thank you" rather than "why?"

## 4. Why Nothing Changes: The Vicious Cycle

If the current approach loses more whales than it saves, why does nothing change? The answer lies in a self-reinforcing cycle that protects the status quo.

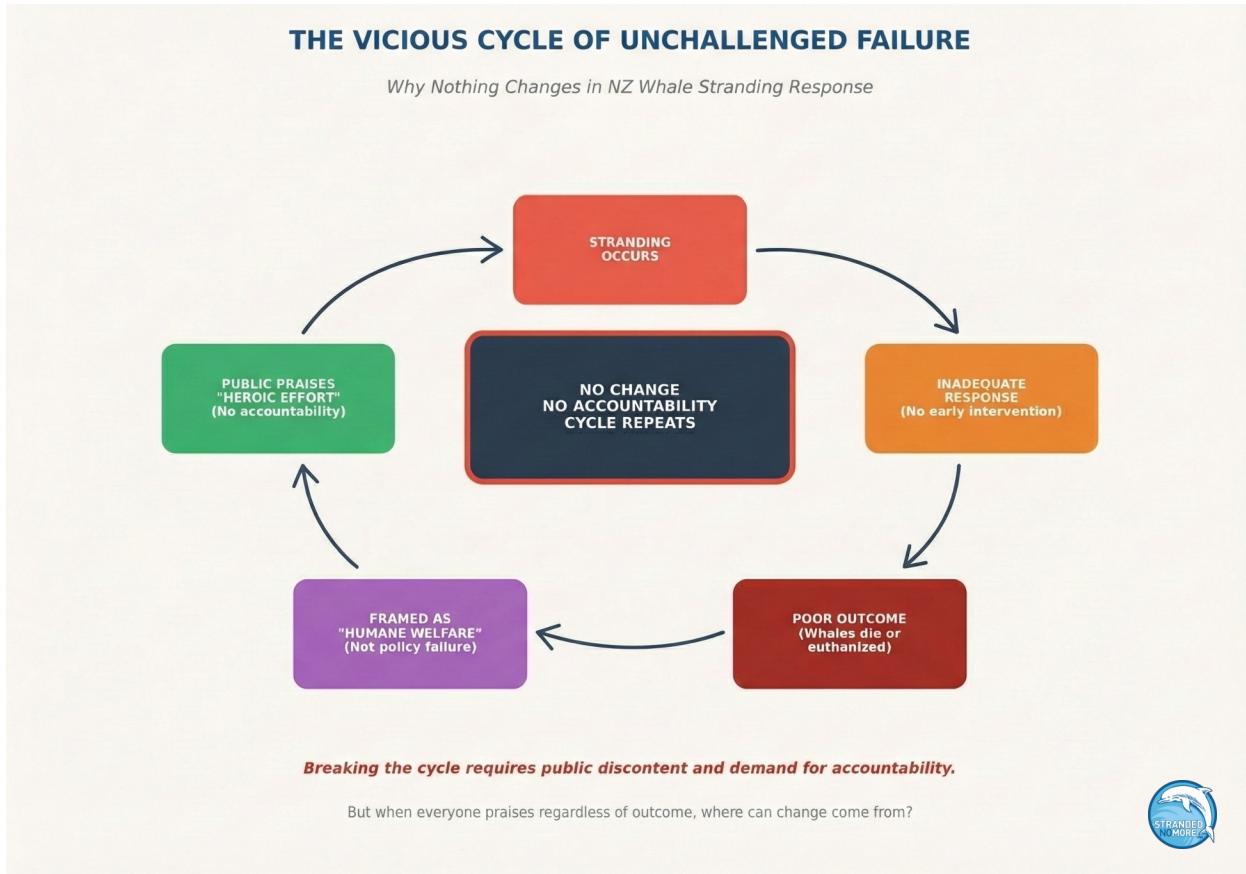


Figure 4: The vicious cycle of unchallenged failure

The cycle works as follows:

1. A stranding occurs (often predictable at known hotspots like Farewell Spit)
2. Response is reactive rather than preventive, with limited early intervention
3. Poor outcomes result (deaths, euthanasia, repeated restrandings)
4. Deaths are framed as "welfare decisions," not policy failures
5. Public praises "heroic effort" regardless of outcome
6. No accountability means no incentive to change

The cycle then repeats with the next stranding.

## 4.1 The Core Problem

**Change requires discontent. But when everyone is grateful, accepting, and praising the effort regardless of outcome, where can change possibly come from?**

The organizations responsible know their position is secure as long as they show up and try, the public will support them. Success rates do not matter as only attendance rates do.

*"They know they can get away with murder, in a literal sense. These strandings are barely investigated. Their protocol has not changed in decades. They just go through the same motions again and again."*

## 5. Is Better Possible? International Evidence

A common defense of current approaches is that whale strandings are inherently tragic and nothing more can be done but the international evidence suggests otherwise.

### 5.1 Tanzania 2025: A Different Approach

In 2025, Tanzania faced a massive stranding of approximately 400 dolphins. Using rapid mobilization, aggressive herding, and community coordination, they achieved something remarkable: nearly 100% success (407 stranded, 7 died, 400 rescued).

Tanzania has fewer resources than New Zealand. They have less technology, less funding, less infrastructure, yet they saved 400 cetaceans.

How? They prioritized prevention and rapid intervention over waiting for cetaceans to strand and then attempting rescue.

### 5.2 The Excuse of Resources

*"It is a common excuse about resources. Developed countries' rescue teams just love to babble about how little money they have, while developing countries do amazing things with very little."*

The difference is not resources, it is approach. It is willingness to try something different and measuring success by outcomes, not by effort expended.

## **6. What Could Change**

The purpose of this report is not to condemn volunteers or dismiss their sacrifice. It is to ask whether we can demand better for the whales.

### **6.1 Prevention Over Reaction**

Farewell Spit is a known stranding hotspot, as whales beach there repeatedly. Yet the response model remains reactive: wait for stranding, then mobilize. What if resources were directed toward early detection and herding before whales reach dangerous shallows?

- The AI buoy system supposedly installed to detect whale presence: what data did it provide for this event? Was it acted upon?
- When whales were spotted milling offshore on January 4th, why were boats not immediately mobilized to herd them away?
- When near-stranding was reported on January 7th in good conditions, why was only one boat sent?

### **6.2 Transparency and Accountability**

Currently, there is no public reporting of success rates, no independent audits of stranding responses, and no evaluation of whether protocols are effective.

- What is the actual success rate of refloating attempts at Farewell Spit over the past decade?
- How many whales have been euthanized versus successfully rescued?
- What changes have been made to protocols based on past failures?

**Without transparency, there can be no accountability and without accountability, there is no incentive to improve.**

### **6.3 Success Measured by Outcomes**

The current system evaluates responders by their attendance, their effort, their intentions. What if we measured them by outcomes instead?

- How many whales survived long-term after refloating?
- How does this compare to international standards?
- What would Tanzania do differently in our situation?

## 7. A Different Kind of Gratitude

The public response to this stranding was dominated by gratitude: Gratitude for the effort, for the volunteers, that some whales survived.

But what if we channeled that same emotional energy differently?

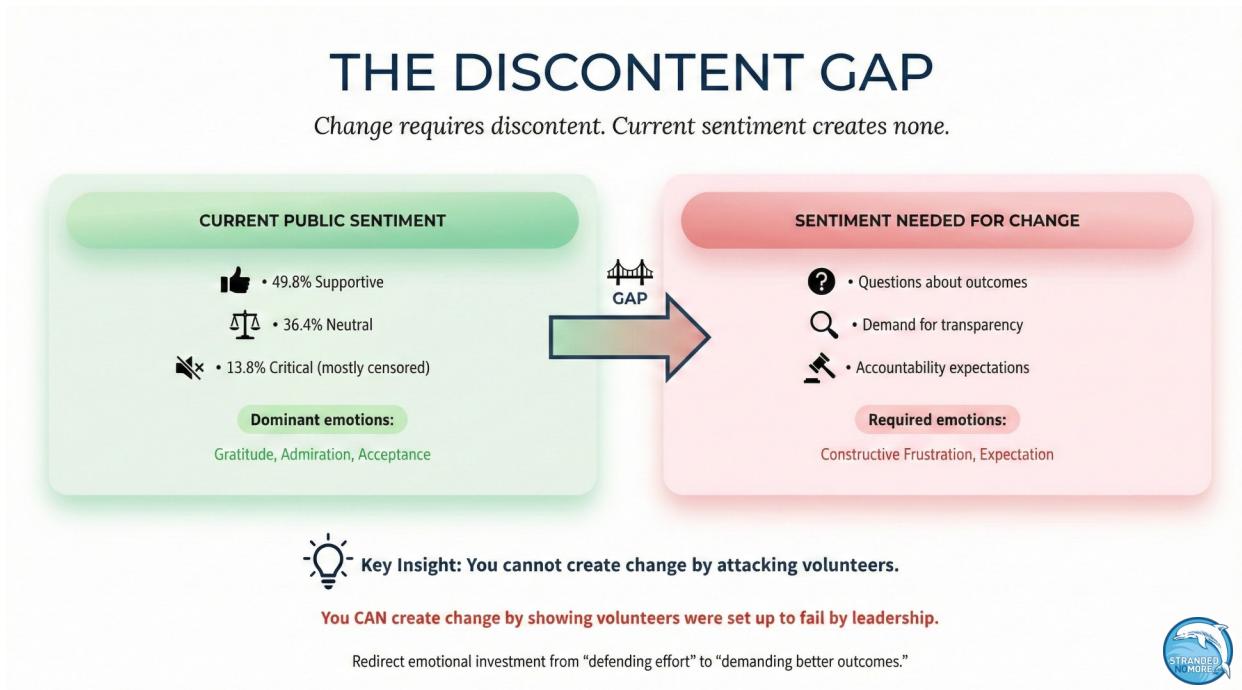


Figure 5: The gap between current sentiment and what is needed for change

Instead of: "Thank you for trying."

**What about: "These whales deserved better. How do we make sure next time is different?"**

Instead of: "At least some were saved."

**What about: "Why weren't all of them saved? Tanzania saved 400 with fewer resources."**

Instead of: "It was a humane decision."

**What about: "What decisions earlier could have prevented the need for euthanasia?"**

Gratitude for effort is appropriate, but gratitude should not silence questions. Respect for volunteers should not prevent accountability for leadership.

## **7.1 Volunteers Were Set Up to Fail**

Here is a perspective rarely voiced: the volunteers who spent three days in cold water, who named the whales and bonded with them, who then watched them be shot in the head, were also **victims of inadequate policy**.

They were called to clean up a mess that better prevention could have avoided. Their physical exhaustion and emotional trauma was real and unnecessary.

Supporting volunteers means demanding that leadership not put them in impossible situations. It means demanding protocols that maximize success, not just effort.

## **8. Conclusion: Demanding Better**

Eleven pilot whales were shot in the head at Farewell Spit in January 2026. The official framing calls this a humane welfare decision. The public accepted it with gratitude for the effort made.

This report asks different questions:

- Why were warning signs on January 4th not acted upon?
- Why was early intervention so limited when conditions were favorable?
- Why does the same outcome repeat at the same location, year after year?
- Why is there no public accountability for success rates?
- Why can Tanzania save 400 dolphins with fewer resources while we lose 11?

These questions are not attacks on volunteers. They are demands for better leadership, better protocols, and better outcomes.

The whales who died deserved prevention, not just rescue attempts. They deserved protocols designed for success, not just effort. Furthermore, they deserved leadership willing to change when approaches fail.

Next time, let us demand more than just showing up, let us demand results.

*Rest in peace to the pilot whales of Farewell Spit.  
You deserved better.*

## Appendix: What You Can Do

If this report has raised questions for you, consider the following actions:

### Ask Questions

- When the next stranding occurs, ask about prevention efforts, not just rescue attempts
- Request public data on success rates and outcomes over time
- Ask what changes have been made based on past events

### Demand Transparency

- Contact your local MP to request independent audits of stranding responses
- Support organizations that advocate for protocol reform
- Share information that questions the status quo

### Redirect Emotion

- Channel grief for lost whales into advocacy for better prevention
- Support volunteers by demanding they not be set up to fail
- Recognize that loving whales means demanding better outcomes, not just praising effort

Change is possible. But it requires us to stop accepting failure as inevitable. It requires us to ask uncomfortable questions. It requires us to demand more than gratitude for showing up.

The next pod of whales at Farewell Spit is counting on us to learn from this one.