

StrandedNoMore

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23 July 2026

To:

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Re: The humpback whale “Hartwin” in Schleswig-Holstein waters. A consolidated summary of six months of correspondence, and our objection to a response strategy that consists of waiting for the animal to strand.

Dear Minister Goldschmidt, dear Dr. Schnitzler, dear colleagues at the Kreis Plön authorities,

We are writing to bring together in a single document the concerns we have raised since June with authorities and scientific institutions in Denmark and in Germany, because the humpback whale we have designated Hartwin is now in Schleswig-Holstein waters, because his condition has worsened steadily throughout the period of that correspondence, and because the position your ministry has now stated publicly amounts, as we read it, to waiting for the animal to strand.

We would like to set out plainly what has happened over the past six months, what we have asked for and from whom, what has been done in response, and what we believe the coming days now require.

1. An animal in visible decline, observed by five countries and examined by none

Hartwin was first documented in January 2026 off Bloemendaal in the Netherlands. In the months that followed he was recorded off the English coast at South Shields, in the Beaulieu Firth near Inverness, at the Lofoten Islands in Norway in May, and then successively through Danish inner

waters from the middle of June onwards, including the Lillebælt, Aabenraa Fjord, Sønderborg, Als Fjord, the port of Aarhus and Vejle Fjord. He entered German waters near the Holnis peninsula at the beginning of July, and your own ministry confirmed sightings at the mouth of the Kiel Fjord on 17 July and in the inner fjord on the following day. He has since been seen in the Kieler Bucht, most recently off Schönberger Strand in the municipality of Schönberg. In total this amounts to more than six months of continuous documentation, well over twenty recorded sightings and a straight-line distance in excess of five thousand kilometres, across the waters of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Norway, Denmark and Germany.

Throughout that period the visible skin disease has progressed rather than resolved. In May, off Norway, the skin involvement was already apparent. By the time he reached Danish waters in July, roughly half his back had turned white and blistered, with extensive orange and white discolouration and sloughing across the head and back. The Danish Environmental Protection Agency stated publicly that the animal is probably unwell and that its appearance indicates sickness. A Danish whale expert has suggested the skin condition may indicate a fungal infection. Nobody has confirmed that, because nobody has taken a sample.

In late May, when he was photographed in Scottish waters, a marine scientist working as a research assistant with an Australian whale research foundation commented publicly that the skin appeared to show a heavy infestation of cyamids, possibly with lesions beneath, and that the tail bore markings indicative of previous entanglement or injury. We offer that observation for what it is, which is an informal assessment made from photographs by an experienced field observer rather than a clinical finding, and the identity of that observer is on file and available to you on request. What matters is the date. Two candidate explanations for the skin condition, one infectious and one of human origin, were placed on the record almost two months ago, and in the five countries through whose waters this animal has since passed, not one authority has taken a sample, run a culture, or otherwise tested either of them.

The central fact of this case, and the reason we are writing again, is that a protected animal has been observed in continuous decline for more than half a year by the marine authorities of five European states, and not one of them has carried out a clinical examination of any kind.

2. What we have already asked, and of whom

On 27 June we wrote to Nynne E. Lemming at the Danish Environmental Protection Agency and to Rune Juelsborg Karsten at the Danish Nature Agency, setting out six specific deficiencies in the Danish Beredskabsplan for Havpattedyr of 2024. We identified the absence of any provision for veterinary intervention on live large whales, the absence of any rescue or refloating methodology, the absence of any acoustic herding capability, the absence of any minimum diagnostic standard for assessing a live animal before deciding to abandon it, the absence of any framework for cross border coordination, and the absence of any distinction between a seal pup that should be left to natural processes and a large whale that has become geographically trapped. We asked for a veterinary assessment of Hartwin and for a timetable for revising the protocol.

The reply we received restated the existing policy of non-intervention without addressing any of those six points. We wrote again on 30 June to Martin Nielsen at the same agency, noting that none of our questions had been answered and that the animal was continuing to deteriorate.

Also on 30 June we published an open letter to Heiko Buch-Illing of Fjord&Bælt and Carl Kinze of the Natural History Museum in Copenhagen, both of whom had told the press that there was no chance for this animal, that there would be no rescue, and that he should be left to strand and decompose so that samples could be taken. Our objection was not that they were pessimistic. It was that they presented a single outcome to the public while omitting the substantial published literature documenting successful intervention with large whales, which we set out in that letter and again below.

On 12 July we wrote to the Danish Animal Ethics Council asking for a statement of principle on whether a state bears an ethical obligation to establish a diagnosis before deciding to let a protected animal die, in circumstances where non-invasive methods of doing so are available and unused. We have also prepared a costed and practical action plan for this animal, which we are glad to provide to you in full.

We set this history out not to catalogue our own activity but to make one point clear. Every authority approached so far has responded either with silence or with a restatement of existing policy. Not one has engaged with the substance of the scientific evidence, and not one has ordered a diagnostic step of any kind. Hartwin has now moved out of the jurisdiction of those authorities and into yours.

3. Remote visual assessment has already been proved wrong once, and is being revised again

There is a further reason why a diagnostic step matters, and it emerged in your own national press last week.

At the end of June, Heiko Buch-Illing of the Fjord&Bælt research centre told the ProSieben news programme Newstime that there was no chance for this animal and that it would die, either by stranding or by drowning within a matter of weeks. He expressed the hope that the whale would not strand in Germany. That assessment was made from photographs and video, at a distance, without any examination of the animal, and it was reported widely as settled expert opinion.

On 17 July the same expert told the same broadcaster something rather different. Asked about the sighting off Heiligenhafen, he said that what confused him was the distance between the sighting in northern Funen and the sighting in German waters, and the short time in which it had been covered. A severely weakened whale, he explained, would not have been able to do that. His conclusion was that, on the assumption that this is the same animal, it is fitter than initially assumed.

We would ask you to sit with that for a moment. The same specialist who publicly pronounced this animal beyond help in June revised that judgement within three weeks, on the strength of nothing more than the distance the whale had swum. Not because new clinical information had arrived, since none has been gathered, but because the animal did something that his prognosis said it could not do.

This has happened before, and recently. The humpback known as Timmy, or Hope, was likewise pronounced hopeless. That animal then survived more than fifteen months in the Baltic, fed successfully, and refloated itself repeatedly under its own power, and the German experts' own contemporaneous record described it as well nourished. The prognosis was wrong, and it was wrong

in the same direction and for the same reason, namely that it was formed by looking at a large wild animal from a boat or a photograph rather than by examining it.

The German Oceanographic Museum in Stralsund has meanwhile told the press that the image and video material available is of such poor quality that it cannot confirm whether the animal off Heiligenhafen is even the same whale. We take that statement at face value and consider it honest. It is also an exact description of the problem. Every prognosis offered for this animal over the past six months has been built on material that the institutions offering it acknowledge to be inadequate.

A blow sample and drone photogrammetry would replace all of this with evidence. Until that is done, no one, including us, is entitled to state what is wrong with this whale or what his chances are. The difference between our position and the one currently being acted upon is that we are asking for the uncertainty to be resolved, whereas the present approach treats an admittedly uncertain and already revised prognosis as sufficient grounds to do nothing at all.

4. Effective diagnostic and treatment methods exist and are not being used

The standing justification for inaction is that intervention with a large whale is either impossible or inherently cruel. The published record does not support that position, and we would ask you to weigh the following against it.

Diagnosis is the step that has never been attempted, and it is the least invasive thing on this list. A respiratory sample, commonly called a blow sample, can be collected with a sterile cup on a pole as the animal surfaces, or by a drone of the SnotBot type flown through the exhalation without ever touching him. That yields bacterial and fungal culture together with cytology, which would establish whether the skin condition reflects a treatable infection or something else entirely. Drone photogrammetry carried out at the same time would quantify body condition properly rather than by eye, and would document the markings on the fluke that have been the subject of speculation for two months. This is a matter of a small boat, a drone and a laboratory, and it could be arranged within days. The animal reportedly tolerates close approach, and boats have been within metres of him in Danish harbours.

Treatment of a free-swimming humpback whale has already been carried out and published. Gulland and colleagues documented in *Aquatic Mammals* in 2008 the health assessment, antibiotic treatment and acoustic herding of a humpback cow and calf that had travelled far up the Sacramento River Delta in California, animals that were subsequently returned to the sea. The treatment was given without capture and without removing the animals from the water. That methodology has therefore been available in the peer-reviewed literature for close to two decades.

Guiding an animal out of confined water has likewise been done. The underwater playback of humpback feeding sounds was used to bring the whale known as Humphrey out of the Sacramento Delta and back to the Pacific in 1985, and he was resighted alive in later years. Olhasque and colleagues reported in *Animals* in 2025 the successful two-day rescue of a juvenile humpback trapped above the Rance tidal power station in Brittany, achieved by adjusting water levels and generating artificial tidal currents, which is to say by entirely non-invasive means. Thalmann and colleagues reported in *Marine Mammal Science* the refloating and release of stranded sperm whales in Tasmania within one to four days of stranding, on animals far heavier than this one. Operational

guidance for all of this is set out in the Woods Hole workshop report of November 2024 and in the Cetacean Incident Manual published by Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania in 2022.

None of this is experimental, and none of it is beyond the means of a state with the maritime and veterinary infrastructure of Schleswig-Holstein. What is missing is not capability or knowledge. What is missing is the decision to use them.

5. Waiting for a stranding is not a contingency plan, and we regard it as a form of neglect

Your ministry stated publicly on 20 July that a reporting chain has been established in order to remain informed of further sightings and to be able to react quickly in the event of a stranding, and that for the time being it is refraining from closer accompaniment of the animal. A ministry spokesperson has further stated that a whale sighting alone gives no cause for concern and does not justify state intervention. We understand the reasoning that dense boat traffic causes stress and should be avoided, and we do not dispute it. We would ask you to consider what the combination of these positions means in practice, because it means that the only circumstance in which the German authorities intend to act is the one circumstance in which acting will be hardest and least likely to succeed.

A large whale that strands is in a substantially worse position than the same whale in the water an hour earlier, and a whale examined and treated while it is still swimming therefore has a materially better prognosis than the same whale examined once it has come ashore. Waiting for the stranding does not preserve the option of helping him. It removes that option while the animal grows weaker, and it converts a case that is difficult today into one that will be close to hopeless by the time the reporting chain activates.

We would also observe that this is the precise sequence that produced the outcome in the case of Timmy earlier this year. Weeks passed in which the animal was observed and discussed while its condition deteriorated, and the intervention that eventually came, undertaken by a private initiative on an animal that was by then far weaker than when it was first seen, is now widely regarded as having harmed him. We are not asking you to repeat that. We are asking you to act early enough that such an intervention never becomes necessary, which is the opposite of what a stranding-triggered plan achieves.

German animal welfare law rests on the principle that no one may cause an animal pain, suffering or harm without good reason, and the ethical literature has long recognised that a failure to act can constitute harm as surely as an act can. An ethicist speaking to NEWS5 during the Timmy case put the underlying point clearly when she argued that human intervention in nature has become so invasive that we carry more and more moral responsibility, including the responsibility to save such animals, and that this responsibility is heightened in cases where human circumstances brought the animal into difficulty in the first place. Given the visible indications of possible prior entanglement on this animal, that consideration applies here with some force.

6. What we ask of you

We are not asking you to guarantee that Hartwin can be saved, because nobody can promise that, and we would distrust anyone who did. We are asking for the following four things, each of which is proportionate, non-invasive and achievable this week.

First, that a blow sample be collected and submitted for bacterial and fungal culture and cytology, together with drone photogrammetry to establish body condition and to document the markings on the fluke. This requires no contact with the animal and would give you, for the first time in six months, an actual diagnosis rather than an impression formed at a distance.

Second, that a marine mammal veterinarian with experience of large cetaceans be formally tasked with assessing the results and advising on whether pharmaceutical treatment following the methodology of Gulland and colleagues is indicated, and that authorisation for such treatment be prepared in advance rather than sought after a crisis has begun.

Third, that continuous monitoring be established, and that acoustic and escort options be prepared for use in the event that the animal moves further into the Baltic, following the operational guidance already published in the sources we have cited.

Fourth, that coordination be established with the Danish, Swedish and Dutch authorities, so that this animal is not treated as a series of separate national incidents by five countries in succession, which is what has happened to him so far.

We would welcome the opportunity to place our full evidence file before you, including the photographic and sighting record, the peer-reviewed literature, the detailed action plan we have prepared, and the correspondence summarised above.

Hartwin is alive as we write this, somewhere in the Kieler Bucht. The methods needed to find out what is wrong with him exist, they are non-invasive, and they could be applied within days. He has now been watched by five countries for more than half a year without a single one of them looking properly. We would ask that Schleswig-Holstein be the first to do so.

Respectfully,

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