An analysis of the approaches taken around the world to whale euthanasia

H Stringfellow*, A Butterworth‡ and MP Simmonds§

* Bristol Veterinary School, Langford House, Langford, Bristol BS40 5DU, UK
‡ OP Veterinary Products and Services, 14 Stonewell Lane, Congresbury, Somerset BS49 5DL, UK
§ Humane Society International, c/o 5 Underwood Street, London N1 7LY, UK

* Contact for correspondence: holly@stringfellowweb.co.uk

Abstract

The stranding of cetaceans raises significant welfare and associated logistical issues. A survey of opinions on euthanasia methods based on the recommendations of an International Whaling Commission (IWC) workshop was conducted. Descriptive statistics showed that the workshop recommendations were generally supported and understood, and these included the use of specific euthanasia techniques, but important barriers to adherence were identified, including lack of governmental support, lack of resources, and lack of experienced or trained personnel. Conjoint analysis of factors identified that 'time to death' was considered the most important determinant of welfare outcome. In view of the findings of this study, it is recommended that the IWC should consider creating a training programme for responders (both veterinary and non-veterinary) to ensure that trained personnel are available who can implement timely and tailored euthanasia techniques, if required, when strandings occur. Further research on this topic is also advocated to ensure a better understanding of what is being applied in different nations.

Keywords: animal welfare, cetacea, euthanasia, IWC, stranding, whale

Introduction

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) was created in 1946 under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) and comprises contracting governments that have adhered to the Convention (IWC 2020a). The Convention was created to conserve whale stocks at a time when hunting was the primary concern (ICRW 1946), but the IWC has progressed to focus on conservation of whales as well as consideration of welfare issues outside of whale hunting (Wright et al 2016). The IWC held a Workshop on Euthanasia Protocols to Optimise Welfare Concerns for Stranded Cetaceans, in 2013 (IWC 2014). This remains the most recent attempt by any international body to address large cetacean euthanasia and, as the workshop report shows, is a complex and difficult issue (see also the work of Barco et al 2016 and Harms et al 2018).

The UK Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) defines euthanasia as “painless killing to relieve suffering” (RCVS 2019). The American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA) defines it as “the use of humane techniques to induce the most rapid and painless and distress-free death possible” (AVMA 2013). Euthanasia of domestic and laboratory animals is well documented and described (Close et al 1996, 1997; Cooney et al 2012; AVMA 2013; Passler 2014), with accepted standards and common procedures recognised for most species. For wild animals, such as marine mammals, including cetaceans, there are far fewer evidence-based guidelines to follow (Barco et al 2016).

Euthanasia of cetaceans is sometimes a necessary outcome for stranding events; where cetaceans become stranded on land and are unable to either refloat themselves or be refloated via human intervention, or when the animal is too severely debilitated, injured, or ill (Daoust & Ortenburger 2001). Euthanasia of whales and dolphins comes with unique challenges, such as location, safety of responders, and public influence (Harms et al 2018).

When cetaceans strand, and their weight is no longer supported in the water, they begin to experience muscle degeneration, skin-blistering in bright sun conditions, and difficulty breathing (Daoust & Ortenburger 2001; Harms et al 2014; Hunter et al 2017). Often the only humane option is to euthanise the animal, especially if the reason for stranding was an injury or illness (Greenwood & Taylor 1980), and as a stranded animal can take days to expire naturally (Harms et al 2018). A triage tree which addresses...