

In the News

WHALES "MASSED SUICIDE" IS A WORLD PHENOMENON PUZZLING TO SCIENTISTS

The mysterious impulse that drives a certain species of whale—the False killer—to commit "mass suicide" on the shore is discussed in the article by Lawrence G. Green, who refers to recent strandings of whales in Tasmania.

Some time ago hundreds of whales, on a beach 50 miles northwards up the coast from Cape Town, came in suddenly through the breakers, leaping over the rocks in a determined dash. Those that survived the battering threw themselves on and on, until they reached the sand. Not one tried to return to open sea. They made tremendous efforts to jump over all obstacles.

A farmer who witnessed the scene said something seemed to drive them on shore.

The death agony of the False Killer Whales is a sight to remember indeed. It is a thing no scientist can explain.

In spite of its name, the False Killer is a true whale—miniature perhaps, but a mammal that belongs to the great family of cetaacea. False Killers, like pilot whales and killers, may be classed with the dolphin group.

The differences between the killer and the false killer is that the killer is conspicuously marked with creamy patches over the eye and along the flank. The false killer is black all over.

Both species have formidable teeth. These are to be expected in the killer, which attacks larger whales and tears away the blubber for food. In the False Killer, feeding on cuttlefish and squids, such large teeth are remarkable.

In 1927, a hundred of False Killers were stranded on the coast of Scotland. Up to that time the species had been thought to be extinct, though a fossilised skull had been found. Since then, False Killer whales have been racing to death on beaches as far apart as South Africa, Zanzibar, and Tasmania.

The "mass suicide," as it has been termed, has become more important than the whales themselves.

DETERMINED TO DIE.

ON Christmas Eve, 1928, about a hundred flung themselves on to the white, sandy beach at Kommetjie, near the Cape of Good Hope. There are no rocks on this part of the coast, and the whales reached the shore uninjured, many of them remaining alive for several days until they died of starvation. Some females bore young ones on the beach.

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Kindly people tried to save the lives of a few of the smaller whales—six and seven footers—by carrying them back to the sea and guiding them towards deep water. The whales would have none of it. No sooner did they recover the use of their powerful bodies than they leapt once more to the beach.

TASMANIAN STRANDING.

THE Tasmanian stranding occurred only a few weeks before the second visit of the False Killers to South Africa. There were about three hundred whales in the Tasmanian school. The False Killers revealed no signs of illness. They were not cast ashore by heavy weather; it was a calm night with no wind.

Details of the Zanzibar stranding are lacking, save for the cabled story that the whales arrived in such numbers that "they covered a small coral islet."

The first and most obvious theory is the possibility of the leader of the school, finding itself in surf or shallow water, losing its head, and leading a flurried rush in the wrong direction. I tested this by walking south from Grotto beach in search of more whales. I found one lying far up on a sandy beach a full mile from the rest of the school. The same instinct, or misfortune, had brought this lone creature to death. It was plain that it had followed no leader and that it had not been swept there by the tide.

ONCE LIVED ON LAND.

I TALKED to the fishermen of the coast. Could the whales have been frightened by some larger or more terrible sea animal? No, they had seen nothing, there was nothing to scare a whale out of the sea.

An interesting idea, linking the two South African strandings, with this: the sea once covered large areas of the Cape Peninsula, including both the narrow neck of land at Kommetjie, and the low coast where Grotto beach lies. Were the leaders of the two lost schools seeking an old passage, an ancient sea route followed by the schools of long ago? Whales do not find their way round the world by chance. They live for hundreds of years, they learn, and they pass on their knowledge as an instinct to their young. The idea of a navigating sense which happened to lead to disaster cannot be entirely ignored.

It was suggested that a submarine earthquake or upheaval might have thrown the whales on shore. But on such occasions millions of fish have been destroyed and left on the beaches. At Kommetjie, and again at Grotto, there

were no signs of submarine disturbance, and no fish.

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Dr. Leonard Gill inclined towards a "follow my leader" theory, though he stated frankly that science cannot even guess at a reasonable explanation. He recalled the method of catching pilot whales in the Orkney Islands. When a herd approached the fishermen tried to drive one or two into a shallow bay. If they were successful the whole herd followed.

Whales once lived on land; the finner whale still displays rudimentary knuckles and finger bones. If we say the False Killers were returning to the earth we may be as near the truth as any baffled marine biologist.