



TURTLE TIMES



Fundação Tartaruga is a NGO focused on sea turtle protection and conservation, but that does not mean we stay indifferent to other wildlife needs. On the 6th of September around 10 am, we received a call at office: there are over 200 dolphins stranded on Varandinha beach, down the west coast of the island. It is a remote beach accessible through the village of Povoação Velha (oldest settlement in Boavista) and turtle protection there is done by the local organization AVPV, one of our partners. A fisherman passing by boat raised the alarm when he saw the animals on the beach. We immediately got on our phones and start mobilizing manpower, equipment and transport as fast as we could as time was of the essence for the survivability of these animals. We were informed other NGOs and government authorities were also mobilizing as such large number of dolphins were going to need all the help possible! Fundação Tartaruga, Cabo Verde Natura 2000, Bios CV, Maralliance, DNA, Áreas Protegidas, Police, bystanders (locals and tourists) and more! It was a long nerve-wrecking journey and although it was sunny and warm, the clouds were closing in which meant more chances of survival for the stranded animals. It was a bumpy “road” through crops and dunes but finally we arrive at the scene. A pod of what seem to be pilot whales was swimming close to shore, their black dorsal fins showing up between the waves and on the sand by the water line we saw what we didn’t wanted to see: death. Seven pilot whales lay dead on the shore while being watched by the rest of the pod (around 30) from close by. There were many people on the scene already and we started to get the story straight. Fortunately there were no 200, but around 35-40, and they were also not the common dolphins, but short finned pilot whales (still belong to the dolphin family).



They were stranded on the sandy beach shore and the first on the scene were tourists doing the popular quad bike tours. They worked hard to put the cetaceans back in the water and managed to do so but the heat, exhaustion and stress killed the seven we saw now lying motionless. Little we could do now so over the next few hours everyone gathered to watch the remaining whales swimming close by and collect precious data from the dead animals. Length and width were registered with some pilot whales reaching up to 4 meters in length! The state vet with the help of the NGOs staff collected tissue samples to be sent abroad where MARCET will conduct genetic tests. It seemed like the work was done when another dead whale come ashore. It had been dead all along and the tides sent it to the beach. Meanwhile people started to leave the scene and shortly after, we started to notice the pod of pilot whales getting closer and closer to the beach. We could only guess why but one theory was that they did not wanted to leave the dead members of their family behind. These cetaceans have very complex social groups and work as a tight family group with deep bonds. A decision was made and about 12 people got in the water to try to scare the whales away from the beach by making noise and splashing in the water, as these animals are quite sensitive to noise. It was a hard task due to the massive waves, strong currents, hidden rocks and of course, panicking pilot whales. For several long minutes we fought the sea to try to keep the animals away but it did very little as they were determined to join their dead relatives. It was like a dance between the pod and us as they tried to bypass our “human shield” while we stood strong cutting their path every time. After a while, they moved slightly away from low waters and we returned ashore, exhausted, hoping the situation would stay this way and improving as the pilot whales moved towards open sea. Little we knew how wrong we were...



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As we returned to our vehicles by the road, we gathered and talked about the whys and hows, and relaxed thinking it was over. There were just a few people left at the beach when suddenly we heard shouts from a couple of people left by the water line. We sprinted back to the shoreline and our hearts instantly dropped. The whales had turned around and moved to beach where the big waves pushed them to the rocks where they stranded. This section of the beach is a big sandy patch with a small rocky area in the middle, the exact spot where the pilot whales were getting stuck. We watched in horror as the animals piled on top of the rocks and on top of each other, struggling like a fish outside water trying to go back to the sea. They hit their bodies hard against the sharp rocks and very soon bloody wounds appeared while a couple of pilot whales that were not stranded swam stressfully close by. Our instincts urged us to go and try to help the poor animals but our own safety was at risk. Strong waves and sharp rocks, not to mention the massive bodies struggling and “kicking”, some of them weighting more than 1000kg. A distraction could meant a hit from a tail swinging or being stuck under the body of one of the whales and that could cause serious damage, or worse. Nevertheless, we could not just stand there and watch as this magnificent animals died in front of our eyes so slowly we started to move in and carefully drag the whales back to the water. The animals were getting tired and fidgeting less which made our jobs easier but still, moving a few hundred kilos of whale over a rocky area was not an easy task. It took some time until we found the right technique (yet the only way we were able to do it) as we used bed sheets to pull the animal by its tail back to deep waters.



We moved them bit by bit, waiting for the water from the waves to ease the weight just enough for us to pull a couple of meters. As soon as we were knee deep, it got slightly easier and the crashing waves were now the problem. Even the poor disoriented whales did not always helped and we found out that if we release them too close to the shore they would just rush back in an urge to join their stranded companions. We had to go to deeper waters and after turning the pilot whale to face the ocean we kept around making sure it did not returned. We worked slowly in 2-3 teams of 6+ people and nothing stopped us. During the rescue, it started to rain heavily, good for the whales but not so much for us. A few hours later, wounded, bruised and exhausted we watched the pod reunite in the water. Unfortunately, one of the young whales did not survived, causes of death unknown but a mix of stress and wounds could have done it. At this point, our eyes were fixed in the water, our fingers crossed that the whales would not get stranded again. At this point, a couple of boats including the Maritime Police joined the rescue and worked as shields between the animals and the beach. We knew our work in land was done and that the team on the boats would make sure the animals were safe. Through blood, sweat and tears, together with all the emotions, there are no words to describe the feeling. We mourned the ones who not survived, but looked to the pilot whale pod swimming in the distance with a mission accomplished feeling that we did all we could for this beautiful animals.



Photo contributions: Bayu Sandi, Roberto Fortes, Dorivaldo Evora