



RIISING TOLL: The humpback whale calf found dead on Fraser Island at the weekend.

Whale numbers mean more will strand on our beaches

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THERE is no link between killer whales grounding in Hervey Bay and a humpback calf that washed ashore dead on Fraser Island on Sunday.

But scientists believe groundings should be investigated, and warn that such events will become more common as whale numbers increase and krill harvesting affects their food source.

About 16,000 humpbacks visit Queensland on their annual migration.

Sea World scientist Trevor Long warned that the sight of whales coming ashore might

increase due to Antarctic factory ship krill harvesting. Krill is the main food for whales.

Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service regional director Peter Wright said the Fraser Island calf was about a month old and was likely dead before it washed up. It was not known how it died.

"Humpback numbers are increasing by an estimated 10 per cent a year but we can expect to see a small number of deaths each year, including calves, as a result of natural mortality rates," Mr Wright said. "Unfortunately, young whales are particularly vulnerable to stranding."

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority manager (species conservation) Mark Read said the incidence of calves dying reflected a growing number of whales.

Dr Read said the natural infant mortality rate was unknown because of a lack of historical data and the fact the population was still recovering from being hunted.

Mr Long said the humpback herd was likely getting close to its east coast pre-whaling numbers, thought to be about 18,000.

It is still unclear what caused a pod of killer whales to beach in Hervey Bay last week when two adults and a calf were lost.