

Dramatic two-hour rescue to free whale tangled in shark nets

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Well-meaning bystanders who worked to free a trapped humpback whale off the Gold Coast inadvertently made the situation worse, sparking warnings from Sea World experts.

Whale rescuers have freed a humpback badly tangled in shark nets off the Gold Coast in what they fear will be the first of many entrapments this migration season.

And they have pleaded with the public not to try to free trapped whales themselves after good Samaritans made the rescue even more difficult and dangerous.

The whale was freed by a Sea World Foundation team in a two-hour operation after becoming snared by shark nets off Greenmount on the southern Gold Coast on Thursday morning.

Sea World skipper Andy Mulville said by the time his crew reached the whale, it had been released by well-meaning members of the public but was badly tangled by the net.



Whale rescuers have freed a humpback badly tangled in shark nets off the Gold Coast. Photo: Sea World Foundation.

“Unfortunately, once we arrived, there had been people in the water that had attempted to cut this whale out,” he said.

“(Their) heart’s in the right spot but it made our job a lot harder, because this animal is now mobile still covered in nets.

“It could have been a little bit easier but it turned into a two-hour process of an animal totally engulfed in net.

“It started diving, it started swimming and it was very close to leaving the bay here still covered in net.”



Members of the public tried to help, but ended up making the situation worse. Photo: Sea World Foundation.

Mr Mulville said rescuers managed to attach large buoys to the whale to slow it down and were then able to cut the net free using special cutting tools.

“We took our time, didn’t want to rush the cut,” he said.

“The hard part about this one was a lot of the net was underneath the animal. We had to physically get the animal to roll. It was a good animal, it actually at times presented its head, and that really helped us out where we could get all the net off its face.”

Mr Mulville said the whale migration season had only just begun and “we are expecting a lot more of this unfortunately”.



The shark net was tangled around the humpback. Photo: Sea World Foundation.

“Unfortunately, I think there’s going to be a lot more calls but Sea World as always is ready to go,’ he said.

“Fingers crossed we’re not needed but if so, we’ll be around.”

The Crisafulli government has come under fire from environmentalists after recently announcing a planned expansion of its shark control program, including extra nets and drumlines on beaches from the Gold Coast to Bundaberg.

The government has defended the expansion, saying it is putting swimmer safety first and protecting the state’s multi-billion dollar tourism industry.

The latest whale entrapment prompted the Greens to renew calls for the Albanese government to reject the expansion of Queensland’s shark control program.

“The evidence of how damaging shark nets are to our marine wildlife is playing out before our eyes, yet the Queensland government continues to ignore the facts,” said Greens healthy oceans spokesman Senator Peter Whish-Wilson.

“Shark nets cause mass destruction to marine wildlife, and evidence proves they do not make our beaches safe. In fact, evidence shows shark nets may attract sharks to beaches, where they can feed on marine wildlife caught in the nets.

“Under federal laws the Albanese government has a legal responsibility to protect endangered marine wildlife, including wildlife killed by lethal shark nets and drumlines deployed by the states of Queensland and NSW.”

Senator Whish-Wilson said he had written to federal Environment Minister Murrway Watt imploring him to remove existing exemptions to state-controlled “lethal” shark net programs as part of planned reforms to Australia’s environmental laws.

“Governments can help keep ocean-goers safe by supercharging investment in modern-day alternatives to outdated and ineffective shark nets and lethal drum lines: investing in shark shield personal deterrent devices, shark spotter programs, eco-shark barriers, bite proof wetsuits, and increasing public education are among many emerging risk mitigation alternatives,” he said.

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