

# Whale's Death in Thailand Points to Global Scourge: Plastic in Oceans

By Mike Ives

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HONG KONG — Hundreds of turtles, dolphins and whales become stranded every year on Thailand's beaches after plastic impedes their mobility or clogs their insides. Some are lifeless on arrival, biologists say, and their deaths barely register with the public.

But the survival of a pilot whale that washed ashore in southern Thailand last week, in critical condition and with a belly full of black plastic bags, became a cause célèbre for ordinary people. And its death a few days later was a vivid reminder of a staggering global problem: plastics in the oceans and seas.

"Many in the region and around the world are extremely concerned about such incidents," Suresh Valiyaveetil, a chemist at the National University of Singapore who studies how polymers interact with living systems, said in an email. "Considering the amount of plastic in the ocean, unfortunately, such incidents are going to be more common in the near future."

After the whale's death on Friday, a necropsy showed that it had washed ashore in the southern province of Songkhla with nearly 18 pounds of plastic in its stomach. Veterinarians had tried to save its life all week, to no avail.

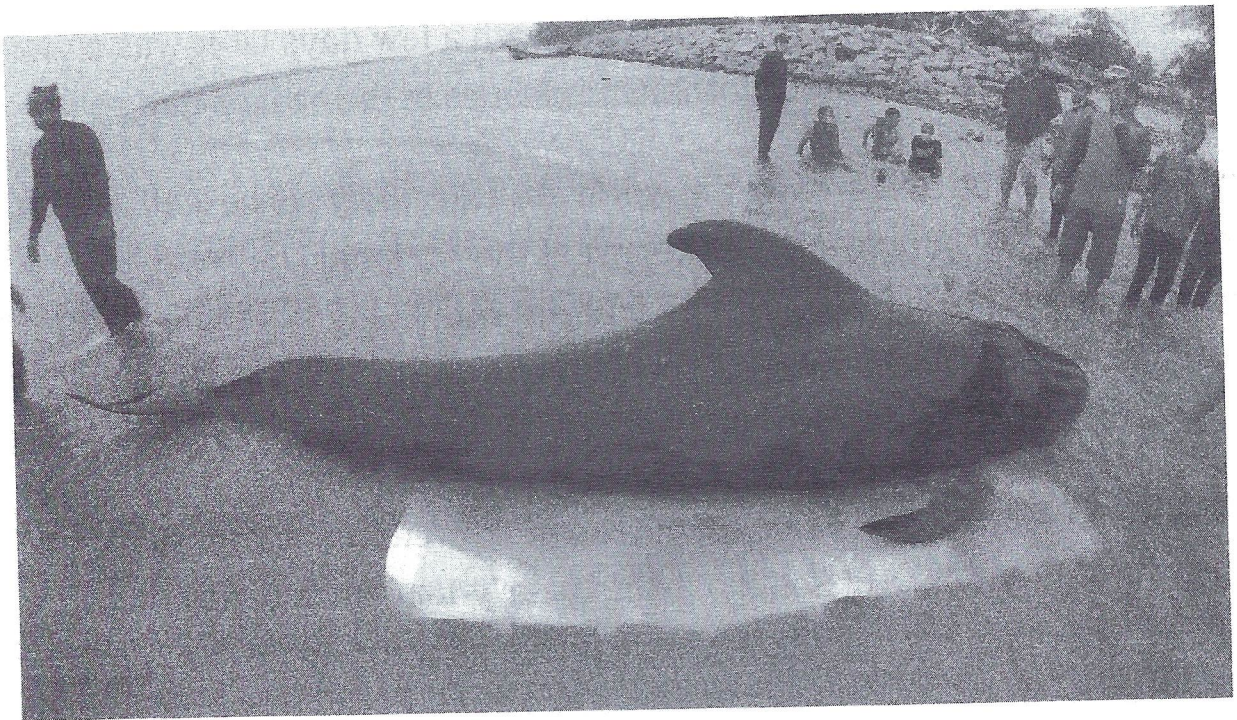
Some in Thailand went on social media over the weekend to express their anguish and outrage.

“I feel so sorry for this poor thing,” one user, Nichapa Samranrat, wrote on Facebook. “I wouldn’t even dare to throw out a small piece of rubbish. Why are some people so lacking in common sense?”

The whale also drew sympathy from around the world.

Of the roughly 8.3 billion metric tons of plastics produced worldwide since the 1950s, about 6.3 billion have been thrown away, according to a 2017 study in the journal *Science Advances*. The study said that if current production and waste-management trends continued, about 12 billion metric tons of plastic waste would be in landfills or the natural environment by 2050.

A need for packaging is the main driver of plastics consumption globally, and the study’s authors said that packaging made up 54 percent of the nonfiber plastic thrown away in 2015.



The whale, seen here on May 28, was said to have had almost 18 pounds of plastic in its stomach. ThaiWhales, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

A separate study that year in the journal *Science* found that the six countries producing the most “mismanaged plastic waste” in 2010 were in the Asia-Pacific region. China topped the list, followed by Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The study also said that an estimated eight million metric tons of plastic waste made its way into the world’s oceans each year — equivalent to “five plastic grocery bags filled with plastic for every foot of coastline in the world,” the study’s lead author, Jenna Jambeck, told *The New York Times*.

Water pollution has been making headlines across Southeast Asia in recent months. First the Indonesian island of Bali declared a “garbage emergency” late last year after garbage washed up on its beaches. And in April, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines ordered the closing of a popular resort island, saying that the water around it posed a danger to public health.

In Thailand, more than 300 endangered sea turtles and between 100 and 150 dolphins and whales are stranded on local beaches every year after ingesting plastic or being somehow caught up in it, said Thon Thamrongnawasawat, a fisheries expert at Kasetsart University in Bangkok, citing government figures.

Last week, the European Union proposed banning several single-use plastic products in an attempt to reduce an estimated \$250 billion or more of marine pollution over the next dozen years. Dr. Thon said he was urging the Thai government to do the same.

“We don’t want to be the country that everyone blames in the future if we do nothing,” he said.

Dr. Thon added that in the short term, he was working with the government on a plan for a consumer tax on plastic shopping bags.

But Anchalee Pipattanawattanakul, an activist with Greenpeace in Thailand, said the advocacy group was calling instead for a tax on companies that produced plastic bags, as well as more transparency from the Thai government on how much plastic waste was actually being generated.

“We need more pressure on the producer,” she said.

Ryn Jirenuwat contributed reporting from Bangkok.

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