**Extreme Whale Rescue**

**Logline**

On watch 24/7, Tasmania’s elite Whale Rescue team race the clock to the save the lives of stranded giants wherever they may be on the island’s rugged coastline.

**Synopsis**

At 08:30 Rachael Alderton picks up a call on the Whale Hotline. A pod of giant Sperm Whales has stranded on Ocean Beach at Strachan, on Tasmania’s wild west coast. Rachael calls colleagues Kris Carlyon and Sticks Greenwood. By 11:00 the team are en route to Strachan with their customised boat, the *MV Princess Melicoff*, and rescue equipment. It takes five hours over twisting mountain roads to reach the west coast, and when they arrive the situation is dire: in freezing rain and a howling gale, twenty two whales - each fourteen to eighteen metres long and weighing up to four tonnes - are being pounded by surf on Ocean Beach. Four more are aground on the sand bar in adjacent Macquarie Harbour. The team can’t be in two places at once. They will have to sacrifice lives to save lives…

Welcome to the world of Tasmania’s Whale Rescue team, where every stranding is a life and death struggle on an epic scale.

If anywhere on this planet needs a Whale Rescue team, it’s Tasmania. The island on the edge of the world is a global whale stranding hotspot, with 80% of Australia’s whale strandings. The Whale Rescue team has to be ready to go anytime, anywhere, from offshore islands to remote mainland beaches. The whales they rescue are the fast hunters from the deep sea, the toothed whales - Sperm Whales and Pilot Whales mainly – and their dolphin cousins. They are social animals, and a stranding usually means whole pods or family groups. Once they would all have died, but now they can be saved – if the Whale Rescue team reaches them in time. How many whales can be saved depends on many factors – the remoteness of the location, the type of whale - obviously a dolphin is easier to move back into the sea than a Sperm Whale – how long the whales have been aground, resources available, weather. Every stranding presents different challenges.

Rachael and Kris are biologists whose job is to focus on the whales. Sticks is a surfer and former park ranger - boats and equipment are his game, and he runs the rescue operation. They are used to adversity, and Tasmania’s rugged coastline and wild Roaring Forties weather provides plenty. But the team are tough nuts - and passionately committed to saving whales.

Every rescue is a battle against the odds. With the successes and failures come a rollercoaster of highs and lows. A stranding is a war zone, with blood and gore, death, trauma and danger. A dying whale can explode into a frenzy at any moment, and a blow from the tail flukes of a whale can easily kill an unwary human. The team are frequently pushed to the limits of their endurance and beyond. Exhaustion and cold are constant companions.

When the rescue is over the science begins. Dead whales are measured, genetic samples taken. Necroscopies reveal the inner workings of creatures the size of a car. Chainsaws cut through the bone walls of the skulls. Whales that have been lying dead in the sun can suddenly explode, covering researchers with stinking, putrid entrails. A whale post mortem is definitely not for the fainthearted.

Every whale stranding is a puzzle. The sand dunes of Tasmania’s west coast are littered with the bones of whales that have been stranding for millennia. What is it that brings these giants of the deep into the fatal shallows? And then there are the dolphins, which also strand frequently. These are coastal creatures, used to shallow waters. Why do they throw themselves on the sand to die?

A whale expert once said that strandings are like a car accidents – the end result looks the same, but the cause is always different. The Whale Rescue team have to be both emergency medics and scientific detectives. They have to try to save the victims, and then solve the mystery of these cetacean car crashes, and why Tasmania has so many.

**Characters**

Rachael Alderton - In her early thirties, team leader Rachael is a specialist in running projects in remote locations. A high-energy livewire, Rachael’s sense of humour sustains even under the most stressful conditions. Before joining the Whale Rescue team, Rachael worked with albatrosses on sub Antarctic Macquarie Island and crocodiles in northern Queensland. And if her job doesn’t already provide enough action, she is also a keen whitewater rafter and mountain bike racer. Adventure is in Rachael Alderton’s bones, and she is known for her encyclopedic knowledge of the natural world.

Kris Carlyon – Also in his early thirties, Kris’s quiet assurance is the perfect foil for Rachael’s high-energy exuberance. Absolutely fearless, Kris is completely at home jumping from boats into wild oceans inhabited by Great White Sharks. The personable quiet achiever of the team, Kris is most at home in remote wilderness locations, and is a rock under pressure. He lives for his job, loving every moment, no matter how evil the smells or how cold the water. Somewhat unusually, Kris also happens to be one of Australia’s foremost experts on Koalas - which aren’t even found in Tasmania.

Mike “Sticks” Greenwood – In his mid fifties, Sticks is the team’s “old man of the sea”, a mentor and advisor who has seen pretty much anything a whale stranding can throw at a rescue team. He runs the show at any stranding, and his experience is crucial to the success of a rescue. Tall and rangy, with the sunbleached hair and deeply tanned, lined face of the long time surfer that he is, Mike tells a great yarn, and his younger comrades hold him in high regard. He is a highly skilled and experienced skipper, and the team’s boats are his domain. Good humoured and ebullient he may be, but Sticks doesn’t take nonsense from anyone, and he runs a tight ship.

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**Proposed Episode Outlines**

**Episode 1**

DAY 1, 11:00 - Rachael picks up a call on the Whale Hotline from police at Stanley, a picturesque town on Tasmania’s north west coast. A large pod of Pilot Whales has stranded on local Seven Mile Beach. The Whale Rescue team mobilises, preparing to travel north. Kris calls Pete Hefferon, Parks and Wildlife Stanley, who reports from the beach that sixty two whales have stranded. Thirteen whales are still alive. Volunteers are keeping the whales cool with hessian sacks and buckets of water. The media are informed and at 12:30 Rachael, Kris and Sticks leave with their boat and rescue gear for the three hour drive north from their base in Hobart.

At 19:00 the Whale Rescue team links with Pete Hefferon at Seven Mile Beach. In the soft evening light, the beach looks like a warzone, with dead whales strewn across the sand. Kris and Rachael swing into action, checking the condition of the surviving whales. A large male explodes into a frenzy of tail slapping and thrashing, almost crushing a volunteer. With a final bubbly exhalation, the whale dies. They have lost their first patient. The key now is to return the whales to the water as fast as possible, but the onset of darkness makes this impossible. With the whales stablised, Kris and Rachael check into a nearby motel, returning to the beach to check on the whales hourly through the night.

DAY 2, 0700 – the Rescue team, National Parks support staff, and volunteers are briefed by Sticks Greenwood and Incident Controller Chris Arthur, a wildly bearded bear of a man who is a legend of the Parks service. Volunteers are registered, and each volunteer is given an armband and briefed on their role. Sticks puts them to work cooling the living animals using mats and sheets, and moving some dead whales to allow access.

GPS coordinates are established for all the whales still alive, and the animals are tagged. Time is crucial; the surviving animals are highly stressed and must be returned to the water as soon as possible. The gentle, shallow slope of the Seven Mile Beach is a significant problem. The Rescue team decides to move the surviving whales to nearby Godfrey’s Beach, where there is both deep water access and a rip that can be used to help get the whales swimming out to sea. As Sticks prepares equipment, Rachael and Kris board a Cessna to fly over the coast to check for other whales, but none are sighted. Genetic samples and measurements are taken from the living whales, and then, over the next three hours, the whales are carefully loaded onto trailers, each with a team to keep the whale safe and cool with wet hessian sacks. The trailers are driven to Godfrey’s Beach, where Sticks deploys the Rescue team’s launch and their inflatable Zodiacs. Covered with wet sheets to protect against sunburn, the whales are checked one last time and then moved into the water. The three Whale Rescue boats are joined by a National Parks boat and the local Marine Police boat. Designated “Swimmers” don wetsuits, and move into the water with their whales. The Whale Rescue Zodiacs stay close by to backup the swimmers working with the whales. Rachael and Kris control the release. Satellite tags are deployed on five whales so the team can confirm their movements when or if they move out of sight.

A whale breaks into a frenzy of thrashing at the water’s edge and the support team has to roll and scramble clear. Like the male the previous day, it dies with a last bubbling breath. The support team are devastated, several in tears.

The Swimmers guide the other eleven whales out through the breakers, using the rips to help them. One whale heads back to the beach to restrand, but swimmers intercept it and turn it back out to sea. The team and the many volunteers whoop with joy as the whales group up and head out to sea, accompanied at a distance by the boats.

Now the unpleasant but vital detective work begins. A whale is opened up in a necroscopy, much to the amazement and fascination of the crowd of spectators as Kris and Rachael work through an abdomen the size of a car, with its enormous ropes of entrails. Everything in a whale is huge.

DAY 3 - The necroscopies continue. Every stomach has to be opened and sampled. Long showers at the end of the day are essential; the smell is extraordinarily pungent. But Rachael remains good humoured – you kind of get used to it. As for Kris, he’s like a kid in a sandpit. At lunchtime (not that anyone wants to eat) the excavators move in to bury the huge bodies. The team are ecstatic. This was a highly successful rescue. Ten of twelve whales saved, and satellite tracking shows the whales well out to sea and swimming strongly.

They may be exhausted, covered with gore and stinking beyond belief, but it is very much mission accomplished for the Whale Rescue team. Now the analysis. Why did these whales strand? They were in good condition, but all had empty stomachs. And this may be the key. They were hungry, and large schools of squid, their main prey, had been sighted along the coast in the preceding days. Rachael and Kris look at the topography of the area – the unusually gentle slope of the beach, and the proximity to the deeper water of Bass Strait. They develop a likely scenario: that the whales were chasing squid in fast pursuit. The squid headed for the protection of shallow water. The hungry whales, focused on the hunt, were fooled by the long gentle slope of the beach. One or two whales, overeager, ran at speed into the shallow water and hit bottom. Whales can’t swim backwards, so they were stuck, with the rapidly falling tide making escape impossible. Their distress calls then brought the other whales in – a scenario that tallies with witness accounts of two whales stranded initially, then other whales following. In other words, an accident, much a like motorway pileup.

**Episode 2**

DAY1, 14:35 - the Whale Hotline rings. Thirteen dolphins are stranded at Quarantine Beach on King Island, off Tasmania’s northwest coast. The remote location means that the Whale Rescue team us unable to take their boats or rescue equipment. This factor, together with limited room on the small charter plane, means that Sticks will sit this one out from home base in Hobart. They will just have to make do with what they find. At 17:00 Rachael, and Kris board a charter plane for King Island, landing at Currie Airfield at 19:00. They are taken to the stranding site, but local volunteers have already returned all the living dolphins to the sea. It looks like they will just be taking samples this time.

DAY 2– by noon, Kris and Rachael have competed the necroscopies taken their samples from the dead dolphins, when a calls comes: another stranding on New Year Island, five nautical miles away. Getting there is a problem. The fisherman who reported the stranding won’t return to pick them up – he has work to do. They ask Marine Police Officer Paul Hunt if he can transport them, but his commanding officer refuses to allow him to help. Very unhappy with the situation and determined to assist, Paul leaves to fetch his own boat and pick up equipment from the National Parks shed. But this will take time, and the Rescue team are racing the clock to save lives. Another local, Jamie King, collects them in his boat, and they race to the island to find a confronting scene. Forty four Pilot Whales and twenty five Bottlenose Dolphins line the high water mark. Six dolphins and four whales are still alive – ten animals that might be saved if the team work fast. But they have no equipment, no buckets or sheets to keep the whales cool and protected from sunburn. They just have their own hands and one volunteer. The weather is in their favour, though – just twelve degrees with strong, cold southwesterly blowing under a grey sky. Back home there is huge media interest in the stranding, with so many whales and two species involved.

On the island, the situation is critical. Not only do the team have to save the live animals, but more dolphins are offshore, attracted by distress calls from the dolphins on the beach, and there is a real threat of further strandings. Rachael, Kris and Jamie use gumboots to pour water onto the survivors. It is all they have. Finally help arrives – Paul Hunt, with another volunteer, Dermott Barnes, with mats and buckets. The extended team goes to work as Rachael and Kris monitor the condition of the animals. Paul is on the radio calling for assistance. They stablise the 6 dolphins, but with so few hands the four whales are a more difficult proposition. A female whale thrashes on the sand and dies – a blow to everyone, but there is no option other than to keep on working.

Another boat arrives to jubilation from the team – five local residents and five young surfers from Geelong in Victoria, on the island for a surfing trip. Now the rescue effort numbers fifteen people, and they have the muscle power to move the whales and dolphins into the water. But another blow – a second Pilot Whale dies as they try to move it to the waters. All the animals have been ashore for some time and are very weak. The team have to get them into the water as fast as they can. Rachael and Kris know that they could lose all these animals, and they are exhausted after hours working on the beach. All around them are the bodies of the whales and dolphins for whom help came too late. One whale calf has two large shark bites from a recent attack, most likely by a Great White Shark.

By 16:00, all six dolphins and two remaining whales are in the water, but they are too weak to even float, let alone swim, without human support. For over two hours, the team exercises the whales and dolphins, hoping they will take the initiative. Only one animal, one of the Pilot Whales, is able to swim reasonably strongly now. As the cold night falls, the dolphins and whales are all swimming independently, but they won’t leave the beach. Normally the Rescue team stay with whales overnight, but the windswept island is without any shelter, and they have no camping equipment. They have no choice but to return to King Island and hope for the best.

DAY 3, 09:00 - Rachael boards a light plane with local pilot Jed Weitjens to fly over not only the stranding site of the previous day, but also to check for other strandings on the numerous small islands dotting the Bass Strait around King Island. The views of the rugged sea and islandscape are spectacular. Rachael is dismayed to see more cetacean bodies on New Year Island – it is impossible to tell whether alive or dead. She radios down to Kris Carlyon. He and Paul Hunt and local volunteer coordinator Shelley Davidson head for the island. The weather is not on their side this time, with a hot sun beating down out of a blue sky. Any whale on the beach will be under immense physical stress. They find one of the Pilot Whales released the previous evening on the sand – alive, but very weak. A restranded dolphin is dead twenty metres away. The whale’s heart can be seen labouring in its chest. They go to work with water and mats to cool it down. Kris is under no illusions – the kindest option may be to euthanase the whale if all else fails. It’s a tough decision, the last resort to prevent unnecessary suffering. Kris has never had to do this before, so he calls the base in Hobart to talk to Sticks, who advises on the weapon and caliber Kris will need. Paul radios to arrange a rifle from a local fisherman, before returning to Currie to pick up Rachael. On the beach, Kris keeps the whale wet while dissecting a dead whale to locate the brain in case he has to perform the euthanasia.

But the whale is still breathing and its heartbeat has slowed. Rachael arrives back with Paul, along with another boat containing Jamie Maurer and five volunteers. They move the whale onto a mat and slide it into the water, but the animal is unable to float upright. For an hour and half they hold it there. Slowly, its breathing, balance and tail movement improve. Its eyes open. But how to get it to deeper water? Then the cavalry arrives – two volunteers, Kaylee and Grant Jordon, on jet skis. Rachael and Kris sling the whale between the two skis with straps under its pectoral fins to keep it upright. Pulling the whale into the water, they ride on the back of the skis, holding the straps. It doesn’t go according to plan. The straps keep slipping off, and the whale turns sideways, still unable to float upright. They change tactics, towing the whale from one ski. This works better, and the whale’s swimming ability is slowly picking up. When it can move its tail and change direction, Kris tows it out into the channel between New Year Island and adjacent Christmas Island where the tide rips along like a fast flowing river. For the whale, this is make or break. If it doesn’t swim now, it will die.

Kris releases the strap. The whale rolls sickeningly – but then rights itself. And swims! It makes a shallow dive, then another. Kris is elated. He gives Rachael and the others on the shore a thumbs up. The whale, as they thought it might, turns back towards its pod on the shore, but Kris and Rachael’s plans works – the strong tide means the whale is swept into the open ocean regardless. They can only hope it won’t strand again, but without their satellite gear they will never know.

But what they do know, after three exhausting days in cold and heat on windswept Bass Strait islands, is that five dolphins and two Pilot Whales that would have died agonising deaths without them are now alive and swimming free in the ocean. It’s a good result, and they celebrate and reflect in Currie’s only pub before heading home.

The search for answers begins. Tellingly, while the Pilot Whales were in good condition and had squid in their stomachs, all the stomachs of the dolphins were empty. Two of the three female dolphins were pregnant, and all dolphins had numerous parasitic nematode worms throughout the connective tissue at the blubber-muscle interface. This would have greatly affected their ability hunt and to navigate. Kris and Rachael put the pieces together: the pregnant females would have been particularly affected, and if weakness and illness had caused one or more of the dolphins to strand, then the others would have come in to help. Pilot Whales and dolphins often hunt and travel together. It was quite possible the Pilot Whales were drawn into the shallow water when responding to the dolphin’s distress calls, leading to the double tragedy.

**Episode 3**

DAY 1, 13:07 - Kris takes a call on the Whale Hotline. Three dolphins have stranded on Carlisle Beach, Dunally, an hour south of Hobart. Sticks requests assistance from local National Parks and Wildlife and brings Rachael and Kris up to date. Because of the extremely shallow water at the beach, they decide that an inflatable Zodiac is their best option. At the base they collect whale mats, mattresses, a trailer, the Little Penguin zodiac, outboard, wetsuits, and wet-weather gear. It is mid winter and bitterly cold – ten degrees, with a significant wind chill factor.

The team arrive at Carlisle Beach. Like Seven Mile Beach at Stanley, this beach has a very gentle slope, making it highly susceptible to rapid retreat of water as the tide goes out. A dolphin calf that had earlier been returned to the water with the three adult dolphins by Parks and Wildlife staff has just restranded. The three adult dolphins are milling about in water just deep enough to allow them to swim, responding to the distress calls from the stranded calf. Despite efforts to help it, the calf dies. Things are quickly going from bad to worse as the three adult dolphins also restrand with the outgoing tide. Rachael and Kris work to stabilise the dolphins while Sticks co-ordinates the Incident Scene and prepares the trailer. Clearly the dolphins cannot be returned to the water here and the decision is made to move them to a location with deeper water in Primrose Sands, a thirty minute drive away.

At 16:20, the three surviving dolphins are lifted into the trailer to lie side by side, tagged for identification. Rachael rides in the trailer with the dolphins to keep them wet, cool and stabilised. At Primrose Sands the dolphins are unloaded and pulled on mats into the water. Rachael, Kris and Sticks work together in the rapidly fading light to push the dolphins out to sea together, but the dolphins immediately head back to the beach to restrand. It is dark now and the temperature has fallen below six degrees.

Shivering with cold, the team turn the dolphins around again, willing them out to sea. The dolphins head east, and the teams’ hopes rise – and fall just as quickly when it becomes clear that the dolphins are tracking the beach just twenty metres offshore, as if looking for a place to restrand. Sticks and Kris follow in waist deep water, while Rachael heads in to try and warm up. More slightly built than the two men, she is more susceptible to the hypothermia she can feel setting in. The smallest dolphin attempts to strand several more times, driving Sticks and Kris to despair. All three dolphins are actively communicating with each other. Sticks and Kris turn them round again and again, but in the darkness it is difficult work. Sticks calls to a Parks assistant on shore and asks him to turn the Landcruiser’s headlights on the scene. Kris retrieves a wheel wrench and a hammer from the Landcruiser and shepherds the dolphins into deeper water, bashing the metal tools together to create maximum noise. It works - the dolphins change direction and move out into the bay, tracked by the Landcruiser’s headlights. Kris and Sticks have reached the limits of their endurance in the bitter cold.

The dolphins move out of sight, but there is none of the elation that normally follows a rescue. Neither Kris nor Sticks feel that they are out of the woods. A sweep the beach reveals no dolphins. At last they can get dry and warm.

DAY 2, 08:45- Another call on the Hotline. The team’s misgivings were well founded – a dead dolphin with one of their tags has been found on Primrose Sands beach. But at least it was only one – two dolphins that would otherwise have died are still out there, somewhere.

Now the search for answers. There is an immediate parallel with the King Island stranding: all three dead dolphins had empty stomachs and parasitic infections parasitic nematode worms throughout their connective tissue. The topography of Carlisle Beach certainly played its part, as was likely at Seven Mile Beach, but was disease also a factor? Or is do all wild dolphins live with these parasites? The next stranding may contribute to the answer.

**Episode 4**

DAY 1, 13:35– Rachael picks up a call on the whale hotline. Twenty eight Pilot Whales lie stranded on a Bruny Island beach. Although the island is a tourist hotspot, the stranding is on a remote part of the coast, without vehicle access. The only way in is by boat, but it will take time for Sticks to get all the gear ready and loaded, and to reach the location by sea from their Hobart base. Rachael and Kris need a fast boat, and urgently. They hire a charter boat, *Wild Thing*, to speed them to the stranding location.

By 16:40 they are at the stranding site, a gently sloping, highly tidal beach facing across the mainland across the D’Entrecastreaux Channel. It is one of the world’s beautiful vistas, but sightseeing is the last thing on Kris and Rachael’s agenda. Twelve of the twenty eight whales are still alive, but they are weak from exhaustion. Sticks is on his way, speeding down the Derwent Estuary in their main rescue boat, *MV Princess Melicoff*. Volunteers, including fish farm workers and crews of two passing yachts, are already at work attempting to refloat the whales. Rachael and Kris dive in and take control of a chaotic situation, marshaling the volunteers and working to stablise the surviving whales.

At 19:00 Sticks arrives in the *MV Princess Melicoff.* Now the team have all their personnel and all their equipment, and tide is rising. They can start moving the surviving whales back into the water. It is brutally hard work, but as darkness falls all twelve whales have been dragged on mats into the water. Their relief, however, is short lived – after being guided out to sea, the whales turn back and strand themselves again. For the team and their hardworking helpers, it is a moment of despair. They have worked so hard to free the whales, only to see this. The Rescue team assures their volunteers that this often happens. It takes time and patience to turn the whales to the open ocean.

The problem is that they have run out light, and another attempt is impossible. They have no choice but to suspend the rescue until the morning. As the tide retreats, the whales will be high and dry again, so the Rescue team and their volunteers stablise the whales in upright position in shallow water as best they can before the rangers and the fish farm workers leave for their homes. The yacht crews return to their boats, while Kris, Rachael and Sticks set up camp with the tents and sleeping bags in the *MV Melicoff*. The team take turns to monitor the whales hourly, but just after midnight, to their dismay, one of the whales thrashes on the sand and dies.

At 03:30 a strong, cold westerly blows up – the one wind direction to which the beach is exposed – whipping up one metre waves. Now the whales are in danger of drowning. Rachael, Kris and Sticks begin the backbreaking work of moving the 11 living whales five hundred metres along the beach into the shelter of the headland.

DAY 2, 0700 - When they are joined by the rangers and fish farm workers, Rachael, Kris and Sticks are utterly exhausted. But there is no rest - now they must try to move the whales out to sea again before there are more deaths. The whales are calmer than the previous evening, and are audibly vocalising with each other. Over two hours, waist deep in the cold water, the team and their volunteers support the whales, allowing the animals to re-orientate themselves and reaffirm social contact. Most are doing well, breathing and moving their tails. Two whales, however, are very weak, and incapable of holding themselves upright in the water. The team move the stronger whales out into deeper water, and everyone is ecstatic when the nine whales move offshore – but not far enough. They mill about fifty metres away, clearly reluctant to leave the two weaker whales. One way or another, the team have to find a way to get the two whales out to the pod.

Worryingly, they are still not responding. When released, they simply roll upside down and bob on the surface of the water. The stakes are high – if they can’t be made to swim, euthanasing them with the rifle on the *MV Melicoff* will be the only way to encourage the pod to leave. But Sticks is sure he can save them – he has never, in twenty years, seen a whale drown. He takes charge of one of the whales, walks into chest deep water, and lets it go. It rolls over, but instead of righting, it, he leaves it. The whale bobs lifelessly for what seems an age, but just when hope has all but gone, it rolls upright and takes a breath. The process is repeated with the other whale, with the same result. The two whales swim out to the pod, and the pod moves out into open water. Jubilation for the Rescue team, the Rangers and the volunteers. Eleven lives have been saved. Sticks follows in the *MV Princess Melicoff* to make sure the pod doesn’t turn back. The whales, swimming strongly, are soon out of sight.

Mission accomplished, the team returns to the beach to take samples and measure the whales that didn’t survive the ordeal. Necroscopies show the animals to have been in good health. The answer to the stranding may lie in the topography of the area, which presents whales with a long bay and two openings to the open ocean, one of which is the shallow sand bar between an island and Butler’s Beach. The whales’ sonar told them this was open sea – which it was – but in their determination to reach open water they misjudged the effect of the falling tide and the shallowness of the water over the bar. The likely scenario was that one whale went too close inshore and stranded, and the others went to help. It was an accident. Like humans, whales make errors of judgment.

**Episode 5**

DAY 1, 08:30 - Rachael receives a call from National Parks and Wildlife Ranger Chris Arthur. There has been a mass stranding of Sperm Whales near Strachan on Tasmania’s wild west coast. Twenty two whales are aground on Ocean Beach, with a further eight whales inside the mouth of Macquarie Harbour, swimming freely but unable to find the way out. Strachan is almost five hours drive from Hobart and the team need to get there as fast as possible. They meet that their Taroona base, and Sticks prepares their rescue boat, the *MV Melicoff*, and their rescue equipment for departure while Rachael and Kris liaise with National Parks and Wildlife rangers at Ocean Beach.

At 15:30 the team reaches Ocean Beach after an arduous drive. Rachael and Kris find the twenty two whales, each between fourteen and eighteen metres long and weighing up to four tonnes, arrayed along the beach. The weather is bleak and cold, with a strong onshore westerly driving ferocious surf. By 16:30 only six of the whales are still alive. The priority is to prevent the survivors from overheating, but they have to be returned to the water as soon as possible - otherwise the weight of their vast internal organs will crush them. Kris and Rachael work frantically with rangers and volunteers, the odds stacked against them. The water conditions mean that boats can’t be used to haul the whales back into the sand, and attempts to move them by combined human hands fail. The animals are simply too heavy. At the same time, news comes in that four of the whales in the harbour have found their way back through the entrance, but the other four have been stranded by the falling tide on the shallow Frazer Flats sandbars inside the harbour mouth.

As the team leader, Rachael has to make a brutally difficult call on their next move. They will leave the six whales on Ocean Beach to focus on saving the four in the Macquarie Harbour, where they can use boats and their purpose built rescue net. Teams of rangers and volunteers stay with the six Ocean Beach whales to keep them cool and stabilised in the distant hope that a rescue may still be possible. The weather reports, though, are bleak, predicting gale force onshore westerly winds, heavy surf up to four metres, and maximum temperatures below twelve degrees.

In the Harbour, the four whales are alive and lying in one and half metres of water, which is good news, because while they may not be able to swim away, the water gives them enough buoyancy to minimise any internal injuries. Working from past experience of a 2007 stranding in the Harbour, Kris calls the local Petuna and Tassel fish farms and asks for their help. Their powerful jet boats can work in very shallow water. Within 30 minutes two of the big working boats are with the team. Under Rachael and Kris’s supervision, and with Sticks onboard, they aim the powerful jets at the most buoyant whale to break the suction of the sand with the water surge. Then, with a dozen helpers, Kris and Rachael slide the rescue net under the now floating whale and sling it between the two jet boats. The whale is slowly pulled across the bar into the channel, where Kris and Sticks wait in the Zodiac. Success! The whale is released and swims freely. Using the Zodiac, Kris and Sticks attempt to guide the whale towards the twenty five metre harbour mouth, known since convict days at Hell’s Gates. But the whale won’t be guided. The light is fading and the attempt has to be called off.

DAY 2, 0700 – five whales have died overnight on Ocean Beach, leaving only one still alive. At 07:30 Chris Arthur and Sticks Greenwood brief the six boat crews. Weather conditions are still extreme, with a twenty knot westerly ripping down Macquarie Harbour. The temperature is nine degrees, without the wind chill factor. A Pigmy Right Whale is found stranded and alive in the harbour by one of the boat teams, and the crew is deployed to attempt a rescue.

Using the jet boats, a second Sperm Whale is pulled off the bar into the channel. In the Zodiac, Kris and Sticks attempt to guide the two free swimming whales through Hell’s Gates, but again the whales baulk. Rachael concludes that the entrance is so small and so turbulent that the whales can’t “see” it with their sonar in their traumatised state. The Rescue team enlist the aid of two other boats and surround the whales from the sides and rear, creating a wall of wake while bashing loudly in the side of the boats. The whales’ only escape from this cacophony is dead ahead through Hells Gates. It works! It is a close thing, with one whale briefly restranding and the other hitting a reef, but eventually the boats guide the two giants through Hell’s Gates and into the Indian Ocean. The team is elated. Two whales have been saved.

But the weather worsens, with the wind rising to over thirty five knots. The boats can’t be maneuvered, and further attempts to rescue the remaining two Sperm Whales and the Pigmy Right Whale have to be abandoned. On Ocean Beach, the last Sperm Whale dies. Twenty two whales now lie dead on the sand, a grim sight. National Parks and Wildlife staff are tasked with gathering samples from every whale. They are too big to be buried, and will have to be left to rot. The sand dunes are full of bleached bones from past strandings.

DAY 3 – Media interest is intense. Between 07:00 and 08:30 Chris Arthur has done seven interviews for Australian and international media outlets. The Pigmy Right Whale in the Harbour has died. The team have given their best, but too many factors were against them. Now they must focus on the remaining whales and redouble their efforts. Unfortunately, the weather has other ideas. A forty knot westerly is driving horizontal rain across the harbour. The frustration and the sense of time ticking away are affecting everyone, but there is no way that any rescue can proceed in these conditions. Kris, Sticks, Rachael and the other rescuers can only head to their hotel rooms and homes and wait the weather out. At 7 pm the news comes through that one of the two remaining Sperm Whales in the Harbour has died - a crushing blow for the team. But for the weather conditions, they might have been able to save it.

DAY 4 – The weather is still severe, but lacking the cyclonic edge of the previous day. At first light the six boat crews are briefed. The tide gives them a four hour window. The rescuers go to work, but the wind is rising, and the weather drives them back again. The west coast is living up to its reputation. The whale is still alive, but the Rescue team is only too aware that after four days, and now alone, the animal must be close to endpoint.

DAY 5 - Finally the weather abates to the point that the jet boats can go to work. Again the team has a four hour window, but this time they succeed. After days on the sandbar, the whale is pulled into the deeper water of channel. Over the next two hours, the Rescue team stays close to the whale as it slowly recovers. The signs are good: its breathing normalises, and it regains balance and begins to swim. Now the team can guide it towards Hell’s Gates and freedom, but they are under no illusions – a single exhausted whale will be much harder to move through that narrow gap. And so it proves. The whale swims strongly, but resists all efforts to push it through the Gates. As morning moves into afternoon, it visibly weakens. After four days on the sand, it has nothing left, and dies next to the Zodiac. The team are devastated.

It has been a colossal struggle against huge odds and the most hostile of environments. Twenty four Sperm Whales and two Pigmy Right Whales are dead. Out of nine whales found alive, two were saved. It is a crushing reality for Rachael, Kris and Sticks. But two giants of the sea are free again. That is much, much better than nothing.

The burning question remains: why did it happen? The whales were in good condition, apart from the internal crush injuries caused by the weight of their own organs. Why did these whales, strong animals in perfect health, swim onto Ocean Beach and certain death? Rachael and Kris know Ocean Beach is littered with the bones of Sperm Whale and other species, some dating back thousands of years. This particular coastline is obviously a problem for the great whales. They look at the sonar, and how it could be affected by local conditions. Exposed constantly to big swells, the sea off Ocean Beach is turbulent and full of air bubbles from breaking waves. It is also one of the wettest places on earth. Rain drives even more air bubbles into the water, where the turbulence holds them in suspension. This has the effect of defracting the whale’s sonar. Add to that the extremely gentle slope of the beach – just five degrees, meaning the water is just thirty metres deep, with waves breaking, five kilometres from shore. The slope is so slight that it is possible the whales can’t read the depth change, and their ineffective sonars tell them that they are swimming into open water. The first whale becomes stranded and the others come into help. Very quickly twenty two giant whales are dying on the beach. It this scenario, the whales in Macquarie Harbour may have realised their mistake, but then made another mistake of thinking the entrance to the vast waterway was a gateway through to the open ocean.

Rachael and Kris have their answer – but unfortunately it means that the strandings will keep on coming, as they have done for millennia, and there is nothing they can do except try to return the whales to the sea.

**Background**

Tasmania’s Whale Rescue team is one of a kind. They are professional whale rescue specialists - the only professional whale rescue team in the world. And they don’t just do whales – their brief includes all marine mammals, so if they aren’t working with whales or refining rescue techniques and equipment, you can find them wrestling smelly, slippery, sharp-toothed seal pups for dye marking on a remote cliff face or offshore island. The team are also at the forefront of research into the endangered Southern Right Whale, pioneering satellite tracking techniques that have revolutionised our knowledge of this majestic endangered species.

The Whale Rescue team owes their existence to an extraordinary woman - Pauline Curran, a wealthy heiress from Hobart who married a penniless White Russian exile in 1926 and became Princess Melicoff. When she died in London 1988, she donated her UK fortune to Greenpeace. Her wealthy Australian estate was used to establish the Princess Melicoff Trust, which not only pays the salaries of the Whale Rescue team, but also ensures that they are outfitted with the best boats, vehicles and equipment.

Whale populations are increasing exponentially at about 10% per year, recovering from very low base numbers. Southern Right Whales are returning to the waters around Hobart to give birth for the first time in over a century. Juvenile humpbacks are taking r&r breaks in Hobart’s Derwent Estuary on their migration between Antarctica and southern Queensland. In mid 2014 two giant blue whales spent a week feeding on krill swarms off Bruny Island, just south of Hobart. The squid that feed the increasing populations of Pilot Whales and Sperm Whales follow migration routes from Antarctica, past the west coast of Tasmania and into Bass Strait.

Everything suggests that the Whale Rescue team are going to have their hands full.