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Whale euthanized after washing up in Surf City

By Gareth McGrath

Staff Writer

A sickly whale that washed up at Surf City was euthanized Sunday evening despite the best efforts of biologists and concerned beachgoers.

Bill McLellan, head of the state's marine mammal stranding team, said the dwarf sperm whale had too many health problems to be returned to the Atlantic.

Along with being emaciated, the whale had substantial liver and lung problems.

But McLellan said the whale didn't have any obvious injuries, such as from a ship strike or entanglement in fishing gear.

"There's nothing we see right now,

no smoking gun," he said.

The roughly 6-foot-long, juvenile female washed ashore around 5 p.m. just north of the Surf City Pier.

McLellan said the whale was initially treated by beachgoers and members of the stranding team before being moved by vehicle to the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center in nearby Topsail Beach where biologists decided to put the animal down.

Ann Pabst, a UNCW marine biologist and another member of the stranding team, said that dwarf sperm whales have washed up along the North Carolina coast before, generally along the Outer Banks.

But because they are deepwater whales, feeding almost exclusively

on squid, they don't normally come close to shore.

Pabst said that's one of the reasons so little is known about the species, including its population.

Until the 1960s, the whale wasn't even known to be a different species from the closely related pygmy sperm whale.

Pabst added that scientists don't believe there's a connection between Sunday's incident and the stranding of three pygmy killer whales in North Myrtle Beach, S.C., 12 days ago.

Tissue and other samples from the dwarf sperm whale, which was dissected at UNCW Monday, will now be distributed to other institutions around the county for further study and research needs.