Pygmy sperm whale found on Indian River beach had no signs of trauma

By Elliott Jones

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — The adult pygmy sperm whale that died after washing up on Indian River County's beaches on Tuesday had no outward signs of trauma, researchers said.

The 765-pound whale didn't appear to have been hit by a boat or attacked by a shark.

"We have to dig deeper and that takes time," said marine researcher Steve McCulloch with Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce. He spoke as an eight-hour autopsy was under way Wednesday. Test results could take weeks.

"We hope nothing unusual is going on" this year, he said.

Typically 15 to 20 whales die annually around Florida.

Tuesday's stranding was the second since Friday when a mother pygmy sperm whale and infant washed up near Cape Canaveral. They were so sick they were put to death.

The 10-foot pygmy sperm whale beachgoers found Tuesday afternoon in Indian River County also was in dire health.

Next to bottle-nosed dolphins, pygmy sperm whales are the second-most likely to die of all marine mammals, McCulloch said. They can suffer from a heart condition where one side of the heart enlarges, reducing blood flow.

The animal was reported by people on the beach near the Sea Oaks condominiums, about 1 mile south of County Road 510.

Using an oversized stretcher, 20 people carried it through sand for 800 yards, moving 100 feet at time. Then they lifted the still-breathing animal up stairs and into a specially equipped ambulance for marine mammals, McCulloch said. Scientists worked on it en route to northern St. Lucie County, but it expired just as they drove into the institute.
"It is very difficult to lose a patient," said McCulloch, who heads the marine mammal stranding program at Harbor Branch. The program is funded by proceeds from a specialty vehicle license plate: Protect Florida Whales.

"Without that we wouldn't be able to do this (the rescue and autopsy)," he said.

His researchers will be checking everything from the animal's stomach contents to its blood in an effort to try to find what happened. They'll slice the teeth to expose annual growth rings so they can find its age.

Finally they'll cremate the remains at an animal cemetery.

McCulloch hopes people on the beaches will keep watching. Sightings should be phoned in to 888-404-FWCC.