

Rescuers Try to Save Whale Who Swam 560 Miles Up Brazil's Amazon River

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A team of biologists and veterinarians from the Ibama (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources), were again this Saturday, November 17, trying to rescue a whale who had strayed in the Brazilian rain forest after getting separated from his school and swimming upstream the Amazon river.

The Minke whale was located on Saturday by residents from Belterra, in the west of Pará state, who informed they had seen the mammal aground in the Jauarituba river beach. The rescue operation had been interrupted on Friday after the animal disappeared.

The 18-foot, 12-ton whale had run aground on a sandbar in Brazil's Amazon jungle some 560 miles from the ocean, Brazilian media reported Friday. The animal was then stranded on a beach on the Tapajós river, 39 miles from the city of Santarém.

Environmental experts said the whale had probably become separated from its group in the Atlantic Ocean, off northern Brazil, after falling ill or being hit by a boat.

The whale appeared to have entered the Amazon near the city of Belém before reaching the Tapajós, a tributary of the Amazon. Efforts to rescue the animal began on Tuesday, after local fishermen contacted environmental officials in Santarém by radio. On Thursday biologists arrived at the scene by boat and isolated the sandbank.

Residents of Piquiatuba, an isolated settlement of about 70 families in the Amazon state of Pará, also helped to try and free their unexpected visitor, splashing water onto its skin to protect it from the scorching sun. Images broadcast on Brazilian television showed dozens of fishermen and curious locals crowded together in the river around the whale's large grey fin.

On Thursday night after rescuers managed to free the whale it disappeared into the waters. Environmentalists used helicopters and boats to try and find the whale, without success.

"What we can definitely say is that it lost its way," Fabia Luna, a government biologist involved in the rescue, told Globo television. "It entered the river, which on its own is unusual. But then to have travelled around 900 km is both strange and adverse."

"It is very atypical to find a whale in Amazônia," Kátia Groch, a whale expert from the Instituto Baleia Jubarte (humpback whale institute), told the Folha de S. Paulo newspaper. "It may have lost its way, perhaps because of illness. We will only

know when we can examine it."

Although the whale's presence was only confirmed this week, Daniel Cohenca, the regional head of Ibama, Brazil's environmental agency, said it may have been in the region for up to two months.

In recent weeks residents near the Tapajós river are said to have become alarmed at the presence of an unidentified animal. Some locals had ordered their children not to swim in the river after rumors spread that a "big cobra" had been spotted.

"There are people who just don't understand how this kind of animal survived in fresh water," said Cohenca.

Rescuers fear that, alone, the whale will have difficulty returning to the Atlantic.

"It is outside of its normal habitat, in a strange situation, under stress and far from the ocean," said Groch. "The probability of survival is low."

The International Whaling Commission Scientific Committee estimates there are about 184,000 Minke whales in the central and northeast Atlantic Ocean.