

## A Whale Tale The Drama of a Humpback Whale in the Baltic Sea

### Communications work by the Ocean Museum Germany regarding the humpback whale ‘Timmy/Hope’

Sometimes a routine topic turns out to be something much bigger than the routinized communications team initially thinks: On 3 March 2026, the Ocean Museum Germany received a report of a whale sighting in Wismar harbour on the Baltic Sea coast in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. A research assistant therefore set off to assess the situation and, if necessary, to help the whale in collaboration with other organisations. The fire brigade of the Hanseatic City of Wismar and the water police freed the whale from around 50 metres of fishing net. The marine conservation organisation Sea Shepherd also supported the operation on site and attempted to remove any remaining lines. Unfortunately, the animal could not be completely freed, as the whale’s restless behaviour suggested that it was under a great deal of stress. It was therefore a conscious decision not to carry out any further attempts to free it. Eventually, the whale managed to find its way out of the harbour. What nobody could have anticipated at that point was that its odyssey had only just begun, and that the organisations involved would be inundated over the following months with an unprecedented flood of media enquiries, hate, hostility, threats and conspiracy theories.

The Ocean Museum Germany plays a dual role (one that would later prove to be its undoing): It is not only a museum that provides information about the world’s oceans and their ecosystems at its three locations—MEERESMUSEUM, OZEANEUM, and NATUREUM—but also a research institution. Since 1980, it has been recording stranding events of marine mammals—particularly porpoises and gray seals—along the German Baltic Sea coast. Scientists analyze the data from these findings to learn more about the exact distribution of marine mammals. During necropsies conducted at the Ocean Museum Germany, the animals are measured and examined for diseases and injuries. This also allows researchers to draw

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conclusions about the state of the Baltic Sea—for example, if plastic is found in an animal's stomach, diseases are detected, or the animal can be identified as bycatch. In addition to dead animals, the Ocean Museum Germany records reported marine mammal sightings in the Baltic Sea. The Ocean Museum Germany is also involved when large whales stray into the Baltic Sea off the coast of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Throughout history, there have always been marine mammals as guests visiting the Baltic Sea. Some left again, others died of hunger or disease.

The animal from Wismar, which was soon identified as a humpback whale, swam along the Baltic Sea coast over the next few weeks. In mid-March, a high-reach influencer (1.11 million followers on YouTube, 882,000 followers on Instagram) weighed in and questioned the expertise of the scientific institutions and NGOs involved. This was followed by the first wave of a social media shitstorm directed at the Ocean Museum Germany, which manifested itself in hateful comments, hostility, and threats on social media, in emails, and in phone calls.

After the whale made a stopover in Schleswig-Holstein—where the aforementioned influencer was also present—it returned to Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and stranded several times. Time and again, the Ocean Museum Germany, the Institute for Terrestrial and Aquatic Wildlife Research (ITAW), Greenpeace, and Sea Shepherd repeatedly attempted to encourage the whale to swim off the sandbar on its own when water levels were favorable. Over time, however, the animal's health deteriorated. The very fact that it ultimately stranded five times was a sign that a rescue was no longer possible. Accordingly, the Ocean Museum Germany and numerous other scientists recommended allowing the whale to die in peace. The Environment Minister of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania also shared this view, which all parties involved announced at a press conference on April 1, 2026. This was followed by a second wave of

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intense public backlash against the Ocean Museum Germany for “failure to render aid.” Tensions in parts of society continued to escalate.

Demonstrations took place and human chains were formed. Across all social media channels, calls were made to burn down the museums of the Ocean Museum Germany or to stop visiting them, and AI-generated images and songs were posted; news articles were flooded with numerous controversial comments. Live streams broadcast nonstop footage of the whale. Finally, on April 15, the Environment Minister announced a reversal of handling the situation. Against the advice of scientific institutions and NGOs it was tolerated that a private initiative could organise a transport of the whale to the North Sea at the end of April. Scientific institutions and NGOs were no longer involved, but they warned against the action, as it would cause the whale considerable suffering.

In mid-May, the humpback whale was finally found dead off the Danish island of Anholt. Until today, the whale’s fate—unique in the world—continues to be covered in the media. Numerous investigations and inquiries into the incident are still underway. Plays and many other forms of artistic exploration are being created to address this extraordinary, unprecedented event.

Since early March—when the whale was first spotted—the Communications and Marketing Department of the Ocean Museum Germany has had to both respond to the immense number of national and international media inquiries and counter the backlash and conspiracy theories. One theory that spread like wildfire across social media channels claimed, for example, that the Ocean Museum Germany was intentionally letting the whale die so it could display the skeleton in one of its museums or sell it for several million euros. Another claimed that the museum had kidnapped the whale calf’s newborn calf. These are absurd allegations, given that the Ocean Museum Germany has been committed to animal

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welfare and environmental protection through its educational and research work for decades.

The Communications and Marketing Office was required and available seven days a week, almost around the clock, starting in early March—even during the Easter holidays. The press officers and researchers responded quickly and reliably to media inquiries, both in writing and by phone. Thanks to their dependable work, a strong relationship of trust with journalists was soon established. The press officers' understanding of the journalistic process also played an important role in this. Every media inquiry, without exception, received a prompt response. The Ocean Museum Germany placed great emphasis on transparency and objectivity in its responses. Another cornerstone of its press relations was a structured, consistent approach. This approach was maintained throughout the entire period, even as public sentiment grew increasingly emotional and hateful messages and threats became a daily reality. Media representatives could rely on the Ocean Museum's subject matter expertise and know-how. The director of the Ocean Museum Germany was available to the press at the Ministry of the Environment's regular press conferences. The Ocean Museum Germany proactively provided regular updates to the media and the public by issuing statements, posting updates on its website, and sharing additional information on the topic ([www.deutsches-meeresmuseum.de/presse/meldungen/post/wal-in-der-ostsee](http://www.deutsches-meeresmuseum.de/presse/meldungen/post/wal-in-der-ostsee), [www.deutsches-meeresmuseum.de/wissenschaft/sichtungen/buckelwal-in-der-ostsee/sichtungen-von-buckelwalen-in-der-ostsee](http://www.deutsches-meeresmuseum.de/wissenschaft/sichtungen/buckelwal-in-der-ostsee/sichtungen-von-buckelwalen-in-der-ostsee)). Inquiries by the public were also handled by the staff.

This intensive communications effort was implemented by a team, that did not grow in numbers throughout the period described above. Besides, there was regular museum's communication und marketing to be done. Nevertheless, the effort resulted in an above-average media reach of well

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over 9 billion (as of August 24, 2026; see attachment). No other topic of the museum has ever (and probably will never again) reached such an outreach. The media and the general public continue to view the Ocean Museum Germany as a reputable scientific institution and value its expertise. The museum's locations consistently attract significant interest and draw comparatively high visitor numbers.

### Selected International Media Outlets

Agence France-Presse  
Associated Press  
BBC  
Discover Magazine  
Euronews  
Gazeta Wyborcza (Poland)  
Islands FM  
New York Times  
Neue Zürcher Nachrichten  
NPR (USA)  
Postimees Nädal (Estonia)  
Reuters  
Salzburger Nachrichten  
Science Magazine  
Tamedia Switzerland  
The Telegraph (London)  
The New Yorker Magazine

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### Positive feedback from the public

“In a situation that is highly emotionally charged, it takes courage to objectively communicate the scientific facts and the realistic chances of survival. I fully share your view that, under the given circumstances, intervention would not serve the interests of animal or species conservation if it merely prolongs unnecessary suffering. Please do not let yourself be deterred from your valuable work. Thank you very much for your tireless commitment to our marine life and for your professional integrity.”

“As a citizen, I would like to expressly express my gratitude and support for your professional and ethical stance. At a time when media pressure often leads to blind, knee-jerk reactions, your call for calm and respect for the natural end of an animal’s life is irreplaceable. [...] It is the highest form of love for animals to set aside one’s own need to help in order to spare the animal unnecessary stress. Sometimes the loudest voice is not the one that helps the most, but the quietest one, calling for dignity and calm.”

### A very small selection of negative emails

(received in German, translated to English)

“You guys are the absolute worst. I hope you end up in hell and that no one helps you.”

“I’ll tear you to pieces in public—that’s not a threat, but a promise.”

“Animal killers!!!!!! Shame on you, shame on you, shame on you!”

“If you kill Hope and put her on display, I’ll make sure the museum burns to the ground... You murderers. Go ahead and report me to the police—I’ve got an entire motorcycle club behind me, and one of them will definitely get

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through.”

“Bunch of scoundrels”

“There are already a lot of us, and our numbers are growing. We'll make sure no one ever sets foot in this museum again, but any halfway normal person wouldn't do that anyway. Get your greedy hands off Timmy already!”

“Your despicable behavior toward the whale is incomprehensible—murdering it for profit. We used to visit your establishments every year—that will never happen again. You are despicable and contemptible.”

“Aren't you ashamed of yourselves??? I'm going to file a criminal complaint against you—you bought a whale just to let it die!!! What kind of people are you?? Just to make a profit off of “hope”... I can't even put my hatred for you into words!!! You should never be allowed to bring more people into the museum!”

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