

Animal Welfare Marine rescues: A lot of effort, but little success

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SANTA CRUZ — In the marine mammal rescue business, you lose a lot more than you win. Out of five whales and porpoises rescued here in the last year, all but one have died. That's still better than the overall survival rate, which is only 5 percent.

Local researchers and volunteers are not deterred, saying they learn something with each effort. But anyone who's nursed a sick dog or cat knows it feels a lot better when the animal makes it through the ordeal alive.

One success story that's given heart to the workers currently involved with the ailing baby sperm whale off Seacliff Beach is that of a young harbor porpoise which washed up sick and abandoned here in October, but is now recovered to the point that veterinarian Laurie Gage of Marine World Africa USA is already planning its release, probably in January.

When the female porpoise, named "D.C.," was brought in last October, Gage said she was covered with cuts and slash marks, had areas of skin missing all the way down to the muscle layer, a deep bitemark in her tail and severe liver damage.

Gage said that at the time D.C. was brought in, the liver damage was so severe she didn't expect her to pull through.

She treated the animal with antibiotics. Then, despite the fact that the porpoise had already lost weight, "I had to grit my teeth and put her on a near starvation diet," said Gage, because of the liver damage.

On a diet of low-fat fish, given in six feedings a day, the porpoise recovered. Her liver is now healthy and she's putting on weight.

D.C., now 4-5 months old, will be released somewhere in this area near a group of harbor porpoises. Being accepted into a group of her own kind will be crucial to her survival, Gage said. She worries that D.C. will be rejected, but is firm in her belief that if an animal can be released back into the wild, it should be.

At the time of her release, D.C. will be tagged with a 3-week radio-tracking tag so that researchers can track her movements. The tag is described as a matchbox-sized device that screws onto the dorsal fin like a pierced earring. After three weeks, the screw corrodes and the tag falls off so D.C. doesn't have to carry it around the rest of her life — which Gage hopes will be a long one.

Commenting on the baby sperm whale that's been near Seacliff Beach, Gage, who's been advising local rescue workers, said, "It's a shame. Nature's just kind of doing its thing. If we can do something to help the animal, we'll do it. But there's just so little you can do. It's not going to straighten its tail."

Others animals rescued over the past 18 months include:

- Kogi, the baby pygmy sperm whale which washed up at Pajaro Dunes at the end of August 1989, lived for five weeks at UC Santa Cruz's Long Marine Laboratory

Whale drops out of sight

APTOS — Rough seas and gale-force winds kept rescue workers from going to sea Monday to check on the ailing baby sperm whale off Seacliff State Beach.

Checking from the shore was Nancy Black, a graduate marine sciences student with the Moss Landing Marine Lab. Black went out twice Monday to check beaches from Capitola to Moss Landing, looking unsuccessfully with binoculars for a glimpse of the 1-ton infant whale.

Also searching unsuccessfully for the whale were Army helicopters from Fort Ord, according to Howard Rhinehart of the UC Santa Cruz Long Marine Lab.

Rescue efforts are also limited by lack of a boat. The marine lab's boat, which went out Saturday, is now undergoing repairs which may take as long as a week.

Meanwhile, rescue workers are mapping strategies should the whale beach itself. Options include building a sea pen of net fencing near shore, transporting the mammal to Marine World or euthanasia.

Beaching is considered likely, Rhinehart said, "unless it swims off into the sunset — which is not in character."

and was then transferred to Marine World Africa USA in Vallejo. The 6-foot-long, 140-pound whale lived there another three weeks, dying at the end of October.

- A newborn beaked whale beached near the same spot on June 17 this year. Identified as either a densebeaked whale or a Stejneger's beaked whale, it was about 8½ feet long and weighed 360 pounds. It was taken to the Long Marine Lab where it lived for four days.

- In October of this year, three porpoises were rescued on succeeding weekends. The first, a Dall's porpoise, washed up Oct. 6 on a beach below West Cliff Drive. It was named Truda by volunteers, and was taken to Marine World. Truda was 5 feet, 3 inches long, weighed between 125 and 175 pounds and was estimated to be between 1½ and 2 years old. She died two weeks later. Her injuries included liver damage, an inflamed intestine and muscle damage from being thrown on a rock.

The second, a common dolphin, also died. The third is the harbor porpoise, D.C., now at Marine World Africa USA, which washed up the weekend of Oct. 20.