



Kurt Ellison

Echo, left, and Misha will be tracked in the wild for a year.

Dolphins wrap up college career

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

Two bottlenose dolphins that have been studied at UC-Santa Cruz's marine laboratory are going home this week to the Florida waters where they were captured two years ago.

The male dolphins, named Echo and Misha, will be taken this week to Tampa Bay, where they will be released, then tracked for a year. Researchers there will concentrate on the dolphins' bonding patterns and their ability to re-adapt to sea life.

It will be the first time researchers have undertaken such a systematic monitoring of released dolphins, officials at UCSC's Long Marine Lab said yesterday at a press conference.

The studies at UCSC have focused on the dolphins' ability to

locate food and other objects by reflected sound waves, said Carol Howard, a UCSC graduate student who is studying the dolphins.

"They're very sound-oriented," Howard said. "They listen for movement patterns."

She said one of the dolphins was blindfolded and was still able to find a ring that had been dropped into the water by following the sound it made.

The dolphins use their sound-tracing capabilities in a variety of ways, Howard said. One of the things studied, she said, is how the dolphins follow sound patterns while they're moving.

Most of the information gathered in the studies at UCSC hasn't been analyzed yet, said Howard Rhinehart, animal health technician at Long Ma-

rine Lab.

The dolphins, both about 8 years old, will be flown to Florida on a Federal Express plane. They'll be kept at Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota until it's determined that they're able to capture their own prey, after which they will be released into Tampa Bay.

The dolphins are "resident animals," and won't leave the bay on their own, Rhinehart said. The Tampa Bay site was icked because the dolphins can easily be observed there from a small boat.

There's often a bond established between two dolphins, Rhinehart said, and that's the reason two males of the same age were picked for this study.

Misha and Echo have established a bond during their stay

at UCSC, and Florida researchers will see how that bond is affected by the dolphins' release into the ocean.

Rhinehart said researchers believe that most dolphins that have been held in captivity and then released survive, but there haven't been any studies yet to prove it.

Rhinehart and Howard said they believe the chances for survival are much better than 50 percent, but were unwilling to give a more specific estimate.

The people who work with the dolphins at UCSC have built up an emotional attachment to the animals, Howard said.

"We're going to miss them like crazy," she said.

The dolphin project has been partially funded by grants and donations.