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Marine Mammal Center cares for the injured, releases the healthy and educates the community

By Jane Northrop
Pacifica Tribune Staff Writer
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A few malnourished, harassed and injured marine mammals showed up on Pacifica beaches this spring.

Rescued by the Marine Mammal Center, the two elephant seals and a California sea lion recuperated at the center's facility in Sausalito.

With great fanfare, Lutris, the California sea lion admitted May 16 suffering from malnutrition in Pacifica, was released at Chimney Rock, Point Reyes National Seashore, June 8 in celebration of World Oceans Day. He was one of four sea lions and five elephant seals released that day. One hundred and fifty patients remained at MMC.

He was reluctant to get out of his carrier at first. Rescuers had to practically tip it over to coax him out, but he finally joined his fellow sea lions on the beach. They took one quick sniff of their surroundings, then frolicked together into the ocean. A group of MMC personnel and media never saw them again, which is a good sign that they quickly adjusted to freedom.

MMC workers use a board placed in front of them to herd the animals where they want them to go in the pen enclosures at the facility and in the outdoors.

During the release operation, workers arrived at Chimney Rock and used the boards to herd an established group of elephant seals into the ocean so the newcomers could be released without interference. Chimney Rock was chosen because it is a place where the elephant seals, social animals, would encounter each other. They were playful after release,

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animals and provide medical diagnoses, treatment and nutritional care.

Another important part of the work MMC does is to educate the public about these mammals in an effort to encourage people do everything they can to keep them safe.

"A harbor seal weighs about 20 pounds and makes a 'ma' sound. People think they are doing a favor picking them up but actually they are separating them from their mom," said Cheryl Reiss, MMC spokesperson.

"By participating in science and environmental education, we get people thinking what their role is, to teach them to be better stewards of the environment," said Boehm.

Riley Smith of Pacifica is one of those educators who works with children to teach them about the majesty and the vulnerability of marine life. Through Americorp and with the Conservation Corp North Bay, Smith will be at the MMC for one year in the education department to conduct outreach, lead tours and engage in grade-specific activities with children. Trained for this and for stranding and rescue work in San Luis Obispo, Riley will be volunteering at the MMC

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Sea lion pup (Photo by Jane Northrop)

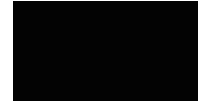
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scouting along the rocky beach. Only one got into the water. The others stayed on the rocks and napped.

In 2009, the MMC admitted more than 1,700 patients, more than any other year since it began operations in 1975. It is on pace to exceed that number this year. Many California sea lions are giving birth in new places and their year-old calves are becoming malnourished. There was an increased number of premature pups seen in April. Full-term pups were seen out of their normal areas and instead near where people are, near wharves.

"What is changing along our coastline?" asked Jeff Boehm, executive director of the MMC. "That's where our data and the work of biologists come into play." MMC mimics mom and provides those pups with maternal care for their first year of life. The longest stay is one year and the shortest is one day, as in the case of a sea lion that caught a fish hook. Other patients suffer from effects of toxic algae bloom and marine debris. Since 1975, the MMC has rescued more than 15,000 marine mammals along 600 miles of coastline and inland areas. A dedicated staff and more than 800 volunteers respond to stranded

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TWO RIVAL TEAMS OF ASSASSINS

for the year she's taking off from her studies at San Francisco State where she is studying biology and ecology. She's on call Mondays in Pacifica for MMC rescue operations.

"This has exceeded my expectations," she said. "It has been awesome working here. I've been included in talks with the vet tech staff. The hardest part has been how to learn to speak to all the different age ranges, from kindergarten through college, and finding their key interests. The education helps prepare me for any aspect of biology or ecology."

As they tour the new MMC facility, visitors see pools where recuperating mammals are encouraged to eat on their own. Before they can eat on their own, they are tube fed a nutritious "mash" made of herring and water.

The facility has an exhibit of some of the MMC's greatest success stories as well as an exhibit of some of the hazards they have faced. Curious elephant seals, sea lions and bottlenose dolphins have encountered all kinds of hazards including bullets, balloons, plastic rings, fish sinkers, lures, lines and netting and barely surviving shark attacks, infections and strandings. In the state-of-the-art lab, technicians are discovering through their blood work that 17 percent of the sea lions admitted have cancer.

"We're doing cutting edge research," Reiss said.

To report a distressed marine mammal, call 415-289-SEAL.

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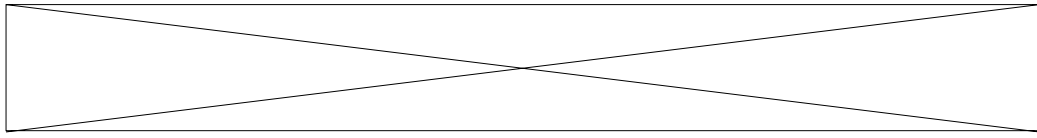
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