

Sick sea critters aided by Marine Mammal Center

June 14 2009, By JASON DEAREN , Associated Press Writer



A sea lion rests at the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, Calif., Wednesday, June 3, 2009. A recent surge in weakened and malnourished sea lions found along the Northern California coast is mystifying scientists and keeping workers hopping at the newly expanded Marine Mammal Center here. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

(AP) -- A recent surge in weakened and malnourished sea lions found along the Northern California coast is mystifying scientists and keeping workers hopping at the newly expanded Marine Mammal Center here.

"We're way ahead in the numbers this year. We have twice as many animals as we should," marine veterinarian Bill Van Bonn said after examining Charcoal, a sick harbor seal.

Experts at the non-profit center, located on wind-swept Marin headlands

just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, believe the perplexing spike in malnourished sea lions along several hundred miles of coast could be due to a decline in populations of smaller fish that young seals and sea lions eat while developing.

"It's likely a problem with the food web, something lower in the food chain that is affected, but we are not sure what it is yet," said Van Bonn.

For 35 years, the seaside hospital has treated and studied ailing elephant seals and other coastal mammals in bath tubs and makeshift facilities. On Monday, as more and more sick animals are needing attention, a new \$32 million building will be unveiled that expands the center's capacity and technical ability at a crucial time.

On a recent afternoon, center staff decked out in rubber boots and yellow slickers busily tended to about 130 critters lolling in the center's new pens, which are shaded by solar panels and feature pools with freshly filtered water.

The center treats an average of 600 marine mammals a year, but last year more than 800 were rescued. In a recent week, staff rescued 10 more sea lions a day than usual.

"It's concerning," said Jeff Boehm, the center's executive director.

The only bright side, Boehm said, is that the center is now better equipped to help solve the riddle.

They have "a state of the art lab, a state of the art suite for performing science and doing that pathological work which helps us understand diseases," Boehm said. The center also has surgeons to repair broken flippers or remove cataracts.

Elephant seals, harbor seals and California sea lions make up the bulk of the patients, but the center also is called upon to help untangle whales caught in fishing nets, or to perform necropsies on dead animals that wash ashore.

Only about 50 percent of the animals rescued make it out alive, but all of them help in the center's scientific mission: more than 14,000 genetic and tissue samples have been stored.

The new building allows for more public access, which is free. Visitors can view the animals in their pens, watch a necropsy or attend classes.

The Marine Mammal Center has also sought to have a lighter environmental footprint in its new digs: ceiling tiles are made of seaweed and structural beams are composed of partially recycled materials. The solar panels used to shade the pens also provides about 10 percent of the electricity consumed.

These days, as the ocean's acidity rises due to climate change, much of the center's work will be focused on studying how this changing sea chemistry is affecting the mammals that live within its 600 mile-reach. Only about eight percent of the center's patients are injured by hazards like fishing nets, tackle or boats.

On a recent sunny afternoon a group of the malnourished California [sea lions](#) barked as two volunteers held one of them down so a feeding tube could be inserted.

The staff force-fed the sea lion, known as Robin, with a yellowish mash of herring, water and salmon oil, hoping to bolster Robin's strength so she can eventually return to the sea.

On the Net:

Marine Mammal Center: <http://www.tmmc.org/>

©2009 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Sick sea critters aided by Marine Mammal Center (2009, June 14) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-06-sick-sea-critters-aided-marine.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.