

Corporate response and facilitation of the rehabilitation of a California gray whale calf

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SeaWorld animal rescue and rehabilitation program

The goal of the SeaWorld animal rescue and rehabilitation program is to return sick or injured marine mammals to their natural habitats. Moreover, we consider the information gathered from wildlife rescues to be a valuable source of knowledge useful in helping to conserve free-ranging populations and guiding wildlife management decisions. The SeaWorld program, and other similar ones, afford wildlife experts the opportunity to learn—in an intimate, hands-on way—about the kinds of environmental problems that impact wild animals. All marine mammals, including those that strand along the US coastline, are managed, protected, and governed by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972¹ and rules and regulations promulgated under its authority by the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The NMFS, through the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, issued a letter of authorization (LOA) to SeaWorld facilities in California, Florida, and Texas permitting them to rescue and rehabilitate stranded seals, sea lions, fur seals, manatees, dolphins, and whales. Consequently, SeaWorld has devoted resources to each of those facilities for necessary equipment, laboratories, holding facilities, and qualified staff to conduct those efforts. SeaWorld's parent company, Busch Entertainment Corporation (BEC), supports the rescue and rehabilitation program as an important part of the organization's commitment to conservation, research, and education. BEC nominally spends around one million dollars each year in direct costs (e.g., food, medications, and labor) to support wildlife rescue and rehabilitation at the three SeaWorld facilities.

SeaWorld San Diego rescues around 100 to 200 stranded animals, on average, each year. But in some years (e.g., severe El Niño events) park rescue and rehabilitation experts have cared for as many as 500. California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*), harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*), and northern elephant seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*) are the most common animals treated at the San Diego facility. But, smaller numbers of dolphins, sea turtles, and sea birds also are rescued, rehabilitated, and returned to ocean habitats.

Previous experience with baleen whales

SeaWorld facilities have had some limited experience caring for baleen whales, including the year-long maintenance of a gray whale calf (Gigi II) in 1971 and 1972². In late November 1989, SeaWorld of Orlando rescued a 2270-kg Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*) that stranded on a beach near Clearwater, Florida. After six weeks of 24-hr a day care and medical treatment, it was returned to the Atlantic Ocean. SeaWorld San Diego also rescued several stranded baleen whales in California waters. In 1982, a young gray whale was rescued from San Diego Harbor. It was severely malnourished, had scoliosis, and was infested with whale lice. Attempts to revive the whale were not successful and it died within several hours of arrival at SeaWorld. Animal Care Specialists were unable to revive the whale, and it died within a few hours of arrival. In 1993, a minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) calf was rescued in 1993, at Newport Beach and a fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*) calf from La Jolla, California. The fin whale died before it arrived at SeaWorld and the minke whale died one day after. Here, we briefly describe the corporate response and facilitation by Busch Entertainment Corporation and SeaWorld of California to the

¹16 U.S.C. §1361 *et seq.*

²See Marine Fisheries Review (1974) 36(4), 1–64.

strandings of two California gray whale calves in 1997.

Initial response

On 10 January 1997, SeaWorld San Diego received a telephone call indicating that a newborn gray whale was evidently about to strand on a beach at Marina Del Rey near Los Angeles, California. Because SeaWorld was the only nearby facility capable of handling and rehabilitating a baleen whale, the U.S. National Marine Fisheries formally asked if we would accept and provide at least short-term care for the several day old calf (JJ). Because death is often imminent without quick intervention after a whale strands, we had to make an immediate decision about providing short-term care and perhaps much greater long-term commitment to rehabilitation. From prior experiences, we knew that rehabilitation would require several months, perhaps a year, of substantial investment of human and capital resources. Consequently, we quickly consulted with executive officers of BEC of the request and advised them on the costs and likelihood of success. BEC's response was immediate, clear, and without qualification—'do whatever is necessary to help the animal'. The importance of that response can not be underestimated because it was key to reviving the calf, which likely would have died with even another day or less of indecision. Several weeks later another gray whale calf stranded and was rescued near Santa Barbara, California. The response of BEC and SeaWorld was also positive, emphatic, and unconditional in providing assistances. Unfortunately, that calf had a severe umbilical infection that quickly spread causing septicemia and death about four days after it arrived at SeaWorld.

Long-term care and rehabilitation

Remarkably, JJ not only survived, but thrived with the intensive, dedicated care provided, and within a month she outgrew her 12 × 12 m medical pool. The LOA (Article IV.2) issued to SeaWorld permitting the rehabilitation of sick, injured, or orphaned marine mammals states that any rehabilitating animals must be isolated from other marine mammals and that they must not be placed on public display without specific prior authorization from the NMFS Southwest Regional Office. NMFS officials recognized the uniqueness of JJ's situation and consequently authorized the movement of JJ to any of the larger pools in publicly accessible areas in the park in which she could be accommodated safely. We then moved JJ to a 6.4-million-liter pool in the park.

BEC and the corporate offices of SeaWorld San Diego also made an early commitment to provide opportunities for public education and scientific study during JJ's rehabilitation. Throughout JJ's rehabilitation, and well after she was back in the Pacific Ocean, SeaWorld San Diego steadfastly was committed to sharing what could be learned about her with the scientific, educational, and general public communities. This was tempered only by the constraints imposed by NMFS regulations that prohibited the commercial advertisement or promotion of her presence at SeaWorld.

Research

SeaWorld San Diego became the first facility in the world where researchers could study an infant baleen whale in detail for several months. In June 1997, SeaWorld San Diego and the Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute hosted a one-day scoping workshop to discuss scientific projects that might be accomplished prior to and coincident with the whale's release. Invited experts included cetacean scientists, the animal care specialists who had been caring for JJ, and NMFS representatives. The participants discussed strategies for JJ's eventual return to the Pacific Ocean and possible research projects. The result of the workshop was SeaWorld's support for various research projects on the whale's hearing abilities, husbandry and veterinary medicine, growth, and behavior.

Public education

Even before JJ arrived at SeaWorld, there was intense public interest in this remarkable whale. The challenge was to respond to the public's fascination with speed and accuracy—and to tie the existing interest in JJ to a larger picture that included educating the public about gray whales and the coastal ecosystem. SeaWorld educators were stationed at JJ's pool to answer questions and provide information about California gray whales. A status board, updated daily, provided information about JJ's vital statistics. Educational graphics gave information about the park's animal rescue program, JJ's progress at SeaWorld, and facts about California gray whales. Park educators responded promptly to massive amounts of mail, telephone calls, and email interests in her health, behavior, and progress. In January 1997 alone, they responded to hundreds of letters daily and logged more than 11 000 telephone calls.

In June 1997, SeaWorld initiated a live 'JJ cam' connected to a JJ web site. Two cameras positioned in the whale's habitat gave online participants views of the whale. More than 179 000 Internet users from around the world logged onto the JJ web site.

In effect, JJ became a 'poster child' for stranded marine mammals and she fostered a remarkable dialogue that enhanced public awareness about many issues of marine mammal biology, conservation, and politics.

In February 1998, the education department hosted a public whale symposium at SeaWorld, devoted to scientific and medical information accumulated during JJ's rehabilitation. Five whale experts who were instrumental in JJ's successful rescue and rehabilitation gave detailed lectures.

JJ's contribution

The philosophy of SeaWorld and BEC is that rescued animals provide insights into their species' biology and ecology. This information adds to the pool of knowledge necessary to conserve threatened and endangered species. Data gathered through animal rescue and rehabilitation programs can help scientists more accurately assess population management programs in the wild. In addition, public policy ultimately benefits by the added public awareness of how human actions, both good and bad, affect animals. This awareness is the first step toward educating the community about ways to conserve and protect wildlife.

In many ways, JJ's rehabilitation procedurally was similar to that of thousands of marine mammals that SeaWorld has rehabilitated during the past 35 years. However, the scope and intensity of the event was far more substantial. The direct costs for her rehabilitation exceeded \$350 000. Although JJ's tenure at SeaWorld was a relatively short fourteen months, the knowledge gained through our experience with JJ will be an important lasting contribution to marine mammal research. She gave scientists, educators, and the public an unprecedented learning opportunity. Moreover, the experience demonstrated that a baleen whale could indeed be maintained and grown with early, unconditional commitment of humans and economic capital and access to well-qualified professional medical and husbandry experience and techniques. Opportunities to revive, nurture, and fully rehabilitate sick, injured or orphaned baleen whales will likely occur again. We think that the experience gained during JJ's rehabilitation serves as a fundamental model for those future efforts and as a preliminary template for providing additional scientific and educational opportunities for learning more about the various details of whale behavior, physiology, and medicine.