

Katrina Animal Rescues

On Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, the worst natural disaster to ever hit the United States, turned the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coasts into an unimaginable world of chaos. One of the hardest hit victims of the storm was Marine Life Oceanarium, the former sister organization of the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies (IMMS). Marine Life Oceanarium, located in Gulfport, MS, was home to 14 dolphins, 26 sea lions, 1 seal, and 25 exotic birds at the time Katrina made landfall. In the following story, you will learn of the true compassion of the human spirit and the harrowing rescues that took place in the days following Katrina.



Marine Life Oceanarium had withstood all the force from Hurricane Camille in 1969, so there was no reason to think it would not survive Hurricane Katrina. Forty-eight hours before the hurricane was slated to make landfall, the path and severity of the storm took a drastic turn. The wind speed rose to 175 mph, and the path shifted putting South Mississippi in the most dangerous area of the storm, the upper right quadrant. The Oceanarium's staff had already begun preparing for the storm, as they had done many times before.

On Sunday, the day before the storm, the training staff began to relocate animals housed in vulnerable areas of the park to more secure locations. The decision was made to move eight sea lions to a trainer's house about six miles inland. These eight sea lions rode out the storm housed in crates that were secured inside a large covered truck in the driveway of the trainer's home. Six of the fourteen dolphins at the park were transported to two local hotel swimming pools several miles north of Marine Life Oceanarium. The remaining eight dolphins were put into a 30 ft. high tank that had withstood Hurricane Camille and every other storm since then. The exotic birds were transported in a truck to Florida and later found temporary residence at the Gulf Breeze Zoo in Gulf Breeze, Florida. The staff at Marine Life worked tirelessly to make sure their beloved animals would be as safe as possible during this terrible storm.



Hurricane Katrina unleashed her fury on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and created utter destruction in her wake. Gulfport endured sustained winds of 120 mph for six continuous hours. Only when the powerful intensity of the hurricane began to decrease was it possible to see the full scope of the damage done. Marine Life's Director of Animal Training, Tim Hoffland, arrived at the devastated facility before the winds had even subsided. What he saw was shocking; Marine Life was completely destroyed. There were no animals, dead or alive, anywhere in the park.



Tim immediately began assembling a team of trainers and other volunteers to search for animals. The team made their way along the beach through the debris and wreckage and soon began finding animals. Four sea lions were found that evening, but it was quickly getting dark so they had to be secured in their different locations and wait until morning to be rescued.

On Tuesday, the day after the storm, the team of trainers and volunteers began their rescue efforts at daybreak. The first sea lion to be rescued was found near Bay Ice, a company that produces and distributes ice. Bay Ice generously allowed IMMS to utilize their building as a home base for all of our rescued sea lions. Three more sea lions were rescued on Tuesday. Two trucks arrived from Florida that afternoon with staff and volunteers from the two marine parks, Florida's Gulfarium and Gulf World, to aid in the rescue efforts. The six dolphins and eight sea lions that had been evacuated prior to Katrina, along with the sea lions that had been recovered on the first day of animal rescues, were loaded onto trucks and relocated to facilities in Florida including Florida's Gulfarium and Sea World Orlando.



On Wednesday, the team located two sea lions that were very badly injured and had to be humanely euthanized. Thursday, the third day after the hurricane, three more sea lions were located and rescued. The following day, Friday, two sea lions were found deceased and two other sea lions were rescued. A second truck, housing the rescued sea lions, left Gulfport to relocate the animals to Florida for rehabilitation.



Five days after the hurricane, one sea lion was found and rescued in Ocean Springs, MS, and another sea lion was rescued closer to Gulfport. On day seven, another sea lion was rescued. Against all odds, almost two weeks after the hurricane, two additional sea lion rescues took place; one of those sea lions was located in a marsh 30 miles west of where Marine Life was located. Sadly, the last missing sea lion was found deceased, and the harbor seal was never found.



Twelve days after Hurricane Katrina, the training staff was finally able to use a boat owned by NOAA, and a helicopter owned by the Harrison County Sheriff's Department to begin the search for the eight Atlantic Bottlenose dolphins that were swept into the Gulf of Mexico from their 30 ft. high tank at Marine Life Oceanarium. Two staff members from Marine Life boarded the helicopter to conduct an aerial survey for the missing dolphins, while two trainers rode on the boat. They decided to search the Gulfport Harbor, an area near the destroyed Oceanarium's location. Within ten minutes, the helicopter crew spotted the dolphins!!! They were found near the State Port's pier, adjacent to the harbor where the Oceanarium had been located!



The team in the helicopter radioed down to the team on the boat and they confirmed that they were the dolphins from Marine Life! The trainers in the boat arrived with food for the dolphins, and everyone shared a moment of complete joy and happiness. The trainers fed the dolphins and looked them over for injuries. Several of them had substantial wounds, all of them were extremely hungry, and every dolphin was in desperate need of care.



The next challenge was getting the dolphins out of the pollution and debris-filled water and into the boat. The trainers decided it would be best and safest to use the dolphin's previous training and have them slide out, or "beach" themselves, onto floating mats. Over the next several days, trainers went out three times a day to feed the dolphins and condition them to beach on these mats provided by the U.S. Navy. Finally, the trainers felt that the dolphins were ready to start the rescue efforts. The first two dolphins rescued were the most injured and required the most immediate medical attention. They were temporarily taken to a local hotel swimming pool.



The next day another dolphin was rescued and taken to the hotel swimming pool. After a few days, pools on loan from the Navy's marine mammal program in San Diego, CA, arrived in Gulfport, MS and were set up at the Seabee Base in Gulfport. Soon after the pools were ready, another dolphin was rescued and transported directly to the Seabee Base. The three dolphins housed temporarily in the hotel pool were then transported to the Seabee Base to join their pod-mate.



The trainers arrived at the same location the next day and signaled for the dolphins as usual, but nothing happened. They waited with anticipation that quickly turned to disappointment when they realized the dolphins were no longer there. This was a terribly discouraging moment for the trainers who worked so hard to train and successfully rescue four of the eight dolphins. Just when the rescue mission was so close to completion, the remaining dolphins were nowhere to be found. After two very long and stressful days of searching, the dolphins were finally spotted.

Because the dolphins had disappeared for two days and the threat of Hurricane Rita was looming in the Gulf, the rescue team decided not to take any chances. They rescued the remaining four dolphins that same day, with the rescue efforts going late into the evening. The last four dolphins were reunited with the dolphins located at the Seabee Base in Gulfport, MS. The dolphins remained at the Seabee Base under quarantine for several months until each dolphin was given a clean bill of health.

