

Cotton, the Pantropical Spotted Dolphin

Monday, May 2, 2005



The Institute for Marine Mammal Studies, the only facility in the Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana area capable of rehabilitating live stranded marine mammals, was called upon last Friday to respond to a rare event. A young adult male pantropical spotted dolphin (*Stenella attenuata*) was in need of help.

Friday afternoon, beach goers noticed a dolphin trapped in the surf of Orange Beach, Alabama. The Orange Beach fire department transferred the dolphin to the calmer water of the bay area and called the Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network. Father Regan, the coordinator, was able to stabilize the animal and phoned the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies in Gulfport, MS to help, because the Alabama branch lacks a facility capable of caring for and rehabilitating dolphins.

The Institute for Marine Mammal Studies sent a team of biologists, veterinarians, and marine mammal trainers to evaluate the dolphin. After doing initial blood work to assess the dolphin's condition for travel and notifying the National Marine Fisheries Service, the team transported the dolphin to its facility in Mississippi Saturday night.

On Saturday, the spotted dolphin underwent additional medical evaluation, including x-rays, ultrasound, blood analysis, and bacterial cultures. The animal, at 5 feet 8 inches long and 132 pounds, appeared to be stable but suffered from an equilibrium problem which caused it to lose its balance. Unfortunately, despite their best efforts and medical care, the dolphin died early Monday morning. However, the Institute still hopes to learn more about the causes of its stranding and about the biology and natural history of this rare species. The dolphin's body was taken to LSU Veterinary School for a complete necropsy (an autopsy for animals). By performing the necropsy at LSU, the veterinary students would be able to learn from the animal as well.



In the past, only 2 or 3 spotted dolphins, which are deep water dwellers, have survived in captivity in the United States. This is the first live stranding of a pantropical spotted dolphin treated by the Institute in Mississippi. It is a very understudied animal and the staff at the Institute hope to learn more about the causes of death when test results from the LSU Veterinary School become available.

Dolphins are on top of the food chain and serve as a good biological indicator of the marine environment. Therefore by studying stranded dolphins and learning about the cause and effect relationship, we can get an idea about what may be going on in nature.

