

Keys marine experts prepare

Response network focuses on dolphins, manatees and whales

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Green solutions

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ON THE COVER



COURTESY OF SAFARI CHARTERS

Florida Keys waters are home to many marine mammals, like these dolphin that Safari Charters out of Banana Bay in Key West often comes across on its tours. (Safari is designated Dolphin SMART by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.) With so many marine mammals living in or passing through Keys waters, local groups are prepared to deal with any fallout from the oil in the northern Gulf.

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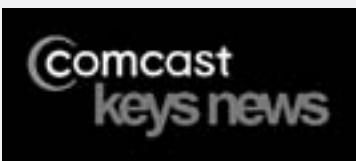
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ENVIRONMENT

Keys experts ready to help marine mammals

Dolphins, whales and manatees at risk in oil

By PAMELA J. SUAREZ
Keys Sunday contributor

No oil from the Deepwater Horizon gusher has fouled Florida Keys waters, but marine mammal experts and volunteers throughout the island chain are prepared to deploy at a moment's notice if any dolphin, whale or manatee requires assistance.

Additionally, organizations and personnel from the Keys are set to support their counterparts along the affected areas of the Gulf coast should they need extra help.

At press time, U.S. Fish and Wildlife reported that 43 injured or dead marine mammals have been collected in the areas affected by the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

"It's all about teamwork," said Robert Lingensfelder, president of the Marine Mammal Conservancy of Key Largo. "All of us, from

About this story

This is the second in a series called *Animals at Risk*, which explores how the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the northern Gulf of Mexico may affect creatures that spend at least part of their time in and around Florida Keys waters, and how local agencies, groups and individuals are preparing to lend a hand if needed. *Coming up next: shrimp.*

the northern Gulf throughout Florida to here in the Keys, are coordinating our response and communicating with one another constantly. It's called a stranding 'network' for good reason."

Beneficiaries of that network may include members of more than two dozen species of dolphins and whales that either live offshore or migrate past the Keys throughout the year, as

well as the manatees that make area coastal waters their home, especially during the winter months.

Gentle giants

Manatees are listed as an endangered species by both the federal and state governments. They are herbivores who feed primarily in seagrass meadows, and they can live up to 60 years — if they manage to avoid boat strikes, entanglement, disease and various other perils of manatee life.

Christy Hudak, marine biologist for the Florida Wildlife Commission's marine mammal program, estimates an average of 50 manatees spend at least part of their time in the Keys. Of those, only a handful migrate up the west coast of Florida — and closer to the oil's current location — for the summer.

"Maybe only one or two of your Keys manatees make

that trek," Hudak said. "Most of them go up the east coast as far north as Brevard County, and a small population stays in the Keys. They learn everything from their mothers, so whatever their mother did about migration, that's what they do."

Should any manatee need assistance in area waters, the Dolphin Research Center on

Grassy Key would respond. According to DRC spokesperson Mary Stella, the team is undergoing the required hazardous materials training, and "if the manatees need our assistance we'll do our best to provide it, but we're hoping it doesn't come to that."

"We are licensed to assess, assist and transport

any manatee in distress," Stella said. "We usually transport to the Miami Seaquarium, but we can temporarily hold a patient here if we need to."

Stella said the past two years have been record setters for manatee deaths, many of which were attributed to cold

See **MAMMALS** / 4

NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY ???



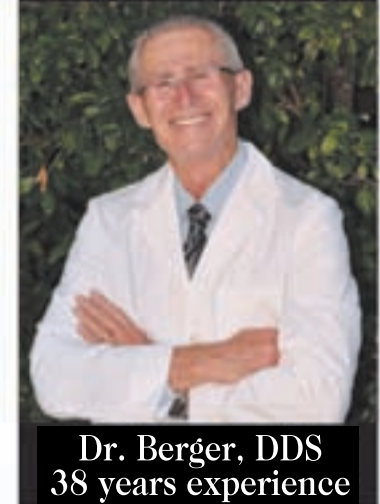
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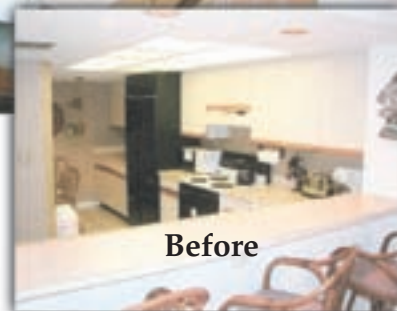
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Dolphins, whales pass through Keys

MAMMALS / From 3

weather stress.

Manatees must surface to breathe air. Both Stella and Hudak said they are concerned not only about manatees inhaling or getting oil on their bodies when they surface, but also about the effects the disaster may have on their fragile feeding grounds — seagrass meadows.

“So much depends upon what form the oil is in by the time it arrives, if it comes here at all,” Stella said. “That will determine what impact, if any, it will have on their food source. I don’t think they would eat tar balls unless it was unintentional, but how might oil affect the seagrass over time? I don’t know. This is an unprecedented event.”

Hudak said agencies and organizations at the federal, state and local levels are sharing information and are coordinating a response plan that will be revised as events warrant.

“We’re continually assessing the situation and that’s probably going to continue as this whole thing plays out,” she said. “It’s all a work in progress and it all depends upon what’s happening from day to day.”

“I’m concerned, but hoping for the best.”

At a crossroads

As leader of the primary dolphin and whale rehabilitation facility for South Florida, Marine Mammal Conservancy’s Lingenfelter and his staff of 42 are in close contact with the wildlife branch of the Deepwater Horizon Response Unified Command on the northern Gulf coast. And although he has seen no adverse effects locally from the disaster, he has grave concern for dolphins and whales in the northern Gulf — some of which migrate through Keys waters.

“They’ve been seeing



DAVID GROSS

A group of manatees wintering in the Keys.

animals swimming and feeding in oil up there,” Lingenfelter said. “The Keys are a crossroads for dolphin and whale migration; we see about 26 different species migrate through here. So yes, at some point we could see animals impacted by oil.”

In preparation for that possibility, MMC staff and volunteers have completed the training required to assist wildlife impacted by hazardous materials. The group has stockpiled supplies and equipment and has mobile pools, nets, fencing, boom and a mobile fish kitchen ready to roll at a moment’s notice.

“We’re prepared to deploy,” Lingenfelter said. “We’ve got plenty of equipment and qualified people standing by, including veterinarians who are marine mammal experts, and we have around 300 volunteers. If things get really bad for the teams up north, we’ll bring their affected animals down here.”

Lingenfelter said any dolphin or whale that strands in the Keys — or anywhere in the MMC’s response area from Naples to West Palm Beach to the Dry Tortugas — will be evaluated by his team to determine the cause of distress. Necropsies will be performed on dead animals. Tissue samples and other evidence will be sent to a lab for testing.

“We might not see external signs of oil on the dolphins or whales because they are constantly replacing their

outer layer of skin,” he said. “But we could see oil in the blowhole, or the effects of inhaling fumes or eating contaminated fish. The disaster’s impact on the food chain could be devastating.”

Lingenfelter explained that dolphins and whales eat fish and squid that feed on plankton that may have consumed the bacteria that fed on the toxic oil.

Should oil in any form threaten any of the dolphin programs throughout the Keys, Lingenfelter said there are plans in place to protect the animals in the short term and even remove them from the affected area if necessary.

Although he is worried about all the marine mammals affected by the disaster, Lingenfelter said he is especially worried about the endangered great sperm whale, many of which make their home in the deep waters of the Gulf.

A dead subadult sperm whale was found floating in the Gulf last week, 77 miles south of the collapsed Deepwater Horizon rig. The cause of death is being investigated.

Lingenfelter said that losing as few as three adults each year over the next five years would spell disaster for that species.

“It’s difficult,” he said. “Nobody knows what to expect because there’s never been an event like this before. But we’re open for business and ready for whatever comes next, and so far, so good.”

How to help

◆ Anyone finding a sick, injured, or dead marine mammal should immediately notify the FWC by calling 1-888-404-FWCC or *FWC or #FWC from a cell phone, or contact the Coast Guard on VHF Channel 16.

◆ The Marine Mammal Conservancy has volunteer training scheduled throughout the summer, including classes on species identification, marine mammal oil response, basic handling and more. Go to www.marinemammalconservancy.org and click “New Summer Training Classes” to see the class lineup, or call (305)451-4774. Training is free, but a \$5 donation is appreciated to help offset the cost of materials.

To learn more

◆ For the Dolphin Research Center, visit www.dolphins.org.

◆ For the FWC’s manatee program, go to myfwc.com/WILDLIFE/HABITATS/manatee_index.htm

What’s here

According to the Marine Mammal Conservancy, the following species of dolphins and whales live in or migrate through Keys waters on a continuous basis:

◆ **Dolphins:** Bottlenose, pantropical spotted, Atlantic spotted, spinner, Clymene, Fraser’s, striped, rough-toothed and Risso’s.

◆ **Whales:** Melon-headed, short-finned pilot, pygmy killer, false killer, killer, dwarf sperm, pygmy sperm, Cuvier’s beaked, Blainville’s beaked, Sowerby’s beaked, Gervais’ beaked, great sperm, Minke, Bryde’s, Sei, fin, great blue, Northern right and humpback.