

## Rescue of an orphaned gray whale calf

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### Abstract

This report documents the events of the stranding and recovery of a live gray whale calf at Venice Beach, California. The success of this recovery was due to the following factors: the calf was healthy, the initial pushing of the calf back into the water provided time for logistics to be established, the cooperation of numerous organizations, and the fortuitous stranding near institutions with unique equipment, facilities, and expertise to handle such a stranding.

Key words: gray whale, calf, stranding.

### Introduction

At 0900 hr on 10 January 1997, we were notified by the Los Angeles County Lifeguard that a gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*) was evidently in distress in the surf at Venice Beach, near Marina del Rey, California, and were asked to help move the calf offshore or assist with a rescue if the whale stranded. We normally assist only with the recovery and removal of dead marine mammals from area beaches, by authorization of the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service. However, because the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County has a truck specifically modified to handle large cetaceans, we mobilized to provide help as appropriate. Before we arrived, several lifeguards and volunteers had pushed the whale back into the surf several times until it finally remained there. From its size, we judged the whale to be only several days old. Consequently, our first approach was to try to locate its mother and reunite the calf with her. However, no other whales were seen nearby, despite excellent sea conditions for detecting them and the aid of numerous observers in television news and U.S. Coast Guard helicopters, and private boat owners who volunteered to search.

Meanwhile, the calf continued wandering towards the breakwater of the marina and was soon lodged within boulders of the breakwater. We slowly approached the calf and began easing the

whale away from the jetty. The whale was covered by whale lice (*Cyamus scammoni*), suggesting to us that it been in physical contact with its mother, most likely during nursing. We next coaxed the lethargic calf back into the breakwater channel. In the meantime, staff from the Fort McArthur Marine Mammal Care Center, a local group permitted to rescue and rehabilitate marine mammals by the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) as authorized under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act, arrived to help. After the calf lodged herself into the jetty rocks again, we moved her back away from the breakwater. Representatives of the U.S. NMFS then advised us to abandon our efforts aimed at guiding the calf away from the jetty, consistent with the agency's policy of not intervening with free-swimming cetaceans, with rare exception.

The whale continued to swim about the area, well-documented by large groups of people, boats and local television and radio news channels who had been quickly alerted to the event. Overnight, the NMFS consulted with SeaWorld of San Diego about its ability and willingness to accept, and perhaps rehabilitate, the calf if it stranded the next day. No other facility in California had the facilities to accommodate such a large cetacean. Moreover, SeaWorld had previously successfully cared for and later released a gray whale calf captured in Baja California for several months of scientific study (Andrews *et al.*, 2001; Coerr & Evans, 1980).

Shortly after the gray whale calf was reported swimming in circles early on 11 January, SeaWorld agreed to assist with emergency care and the NMFS authorized an attempt to strand the calf for rescue. Our plan was to strand the calf, transfer the calf from the beach to the street in the museum's open flatbed whale truck, then transfer the calf to SeaWorld in a covered truck with a volunteer keeping the animal cool. During the next several hours of planning and implementing rescue of the calf, control of a large and growing crowd of spectators became a central issue, particularly as television and radio stations were quickly and widely spreading news of the calf's plight. The Los Angeles



**Figure 1.** Final stages of rescue of a California gray whale calf at Marina del Rey, California on 12 January 1997.

County Lifeguards and Los Angeles Police promptly responded to monitor the mostly concerned and curious crowd and to facilitate and expedite the rescue attempt.

At around 1130 hr, we tried to herd the calf toward a nearby sandy beach using several small boats. After several unsuccessful attempts to herd and strand the calf with the boats, several other people got in the water and surrounded her. Instead of swimming under us, as it had the boats, the calf headed first toward the boat marina and then straight toward the gently sloping sandy beach just below our museum truck. While the calf was in shallow water we surrounded it and then, with the help of mild surf, were able to push it up on to the wet sand (Fig. 1). We continually moistened and cooled the calf with buckets of seawater as the truck was moved closer. We then positioned two long stretchers (*ca.* 2.5 m each) under the calf by gently rolling it back and forth until one stretcher pole was on either side and the whale was lying on top of the sling. We placed soft lifeguard rescue buoys under the whale's head to prevent injury and then twelve people slowly lifted and inched the stretcher and whale up the beach to the truck. The truck's winch also was hooked to the stretcher to help pull it up the beach.

By 1400 hr we loaded the calf onto the truck (Fig. 2) and moved it off the beach and onto a larger, covered truck for the transport to SeaWorld in San

Diego. Both the Los Angeles Police Department and the California Highway Patrol provided escort during the two-hour drive to San Diego.

The successful rescue and rehabilitation of a cetacean is an extremely rare event. Most live strandings are of moribund animals that may likely die regardless of efforts to rescue and give emergency care. The rescue of this gray whale infant was rather unusual. We think that it succeeded for the following reasons:

- (1) Although very young and recently abandoned or separated from its mother, the calf appeared otherwise relatively healthy and was not injured too much by washing about the surf or jetty rocks.
- (2) Pushing a dependant calf offshore, without an adult of the same species in sight, is a poor approach in most cases, because the calf will likely starve and die or be seriously injured if not quickly united with its mother. However in this event, keeping the whale in the water inadvertently provided time needed to organize the logistics for a successful, less stressful rescue.
- (3) The weather was mild and ideal for a rescue attempt. Seas were virtually calm on 11 and 12 January, in contrast with surf of 2 m or more several days earlier. High overcast allowed good visibility while reducing the chances that the calf could overheat during the rescue.



**Figure 2.** Neonatal California gray whale calf (JJ) after rescue and loading on truck for transfer to transport vehicle to SeaWorld San Diego.

(4) The rescue took place on a gently sloping beach with quick access to a paved road.

(5) The remarkably cooperative rescue effort engaged a large number of federal, state, and local, private organizations, and individuals was key for the safe and efficient rescue.

(6) The stranding occurred relatively near facilities equipped with adequate rescue equipment and only several hours away from an institution with facilities, resources and previous expertise for giving emergency care and long-term rehabilitation of a large cetacean.

(7) By the time that the whale stranded on 11 January, she was semi-comatose and relatively inactive, allowing us to move and transfer her onto the truck and then down to SeaWorld without substantive injury to the calf or to those assisting the rescue.

#### Acknowledgments

The LACMNH's 7-ton capacity, 17-foot tilt bed, 4-wheel drive F-750 truck was specifically designed and donated for marine mammal salvage efforts by the Ford Motor Company. We thank all those who assisted and facilitated the rescue efforts on 11 January 1997, particularly those who helped organize the larger, covered truck that later transported JJ to SeaWorld of San Diego.

#### Literature Cited

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