PRESS RELEASE - EAAM

MOBILIZING ALL EXPERTS TO HELP MARINE MAMMALS IN TROUBLE

Overfishing, noise, boat traffic, pollution: our seas are deteriorating. In such conditions, many marine mammals are not making it in their struggle to survive. The European Association for Aquatic Mammals is calling for a sacred union and offers their expertise in marine mammal care to aid rescue efforts.

More and more cetaceans and pinnipeds are observed in distress worldwide. Several studies show that their immunity is impaired by human activities, therefore they are more frequently subject to infectious diseases. Current population-level stressors such as insufficient prey, high levels of contaminants, and noise pollution, often predispose them to these fatal infections. Numerous individuals show scars left by propellers, others are directly hit by boats, even emaciated dolphins or killer whales are observed on a regular basis.

In 2018, more than 40 marine mammal experts convened at a zoo member of the European Association for Aquatic Mammals (EAAM) under the auspices of the IUCN. Their alarming report showed a rapid level of decline in several dolphin species. This workshop calls to unite every specialist working in the field (in situ) and in the zoological arena (ex situ). All scientific information, as well as the expertise developed in zoological institutions, is essential to apply efficient protective measures to guarantee a possible future for small cetaceans in the wild.

Recently, on May 16th in France, a disorientated orca was seen for the first time in Honfleur and Le Havre near the mouth of the Seine. The orca was observed swimming erratically heading inland thus attracting the attention of the media and several naturalistic associations. Professionals and the authorities made several unsuccessful attempts to drive the distressed animal back to the open sea using playback of conspecific calls, sadly the 4-year-old male was found dead on May 30th.

A necropsy was immediately performed and the reported results lead to “the hypothesis that the animal died of starvation, although the definitive cause of death remains uncertain.”

In similar cases quick intervention has been proven to be the key factor for survival. The sooner a wild animal in a clear state of distress can be examined by an expert veterinarian, the higher the chances are to be able to provide the most appropriate interventions for the best possible outcome for the animal.

In June 2010 Morgan, a female killer whale, was found in an unhealthy condition, severely underweight and malnourished. The Dutch government rapidly called on a team of marine mammal expert veterinarians and animal caretakers from a zoological institution in The Netherlands. Given the alarming condition of the animal, the decision was immediately taken to move her to a rescue center to provide a complete medical checkup and start an assisted feeding program. After complete clinical recovery the animal was judged non releasable due to her young age and joined a group of killer whales born in human care housed at Loro Parque, an EAAM Institutional Member in The
Canary Islands (Spain). Further analysis showed she was suffering from severe hearing impairment likely resulting in her inability to thrive in her native environment.

In several countries all over the world protocols including prompt and active intervention, diagnosis, treatment and, when possible, reintroduction into the wild of stranded animals have proven to be effective. In the United States in the last 50 years, Sea World experts have rescued over 1770 seals and sea lions, 516 cetaceans and 607 manatees.

Thanks to the medical and biological expertise gained in zoological institutions, actions are currently being taken to assist “in situ” declining wild populations such as the Southern Resident orca population near Vancouver, which are receiving long acting immunity boosters.

The main goal of our modern societies is and should be to restore a natural environment where these marine creatures can thrive like they did for millions of years.

**Political actions based on accurate scientific expertise need to urgently tackle marine environment deterioration**, in order to prevent recurrence of cases such as Morgan or the recent male orca lost in the Seine River.

To be able to react in the most proper, efficient and rapid manner, we should be better prepared. In order to provide the most appropriate intervention to such cases, the EAAM is calling upon authorities to mobilize all experts in the field such as conservationists, zoological veterinarians, and animal care experts. In France, for example, two institutional and active members of our community, recognized for their research programs and level of expertise, could massively contribute to enlarge the scope of solutions we can offer in the future to distressed marine mammals.