



Dolphins Missing After Katrina Found

Aquarium's Eight Dolphins Found Huddled Together

Sep. 15, 2005 - Eight bottlenose dolphins that were washed out of their aquarium tank in Gulfport, Miss., have been found swimming together in the Gulf of Mexico. But they're not safe yet.

Because the dolphins are domesticated, aquarium officials fear they can't survive in the wild and that the effort to recapture them will take some time.

Moby Solangi, owner and director of the Marine Life Oceanarium in Gulfport, moved as many of his 14 dolphins as time allowed to hotels on higher ground. Three took up residence in the pool at Gulfport's Best Western, and three made the pool at the Holiday Inn their home during the storm.

The remaining eight stayed behind at the aquarium's pool "that has survived every hurricane, including Camille, and survived [Katrina] as well, but didn't survive the 40-foot tidal wave," Solangi said.

That wave swept away all eight dolphins. It also destroyed the pool, which will take 18 to 24 months to rebuild, Solangi said. The six dolphins who rode out the storm in hotel pools have all since been transferred to the Gulfarium in Fort Walton Beach, Fla.

For nearly two weeks, there were no signs of the eight missing dolphins. Finally, the head of the aquarium secured a ride on a sheriff's department helicopter and what he saw, after just five minutes, was surprising. The eight dolphins were swimming together in the Gulf of Mexico.

"It was total astonishment and a miracle that you have eight dolphins that were swept away and are now right back in your backyard and you can touch 'em," Solangi said.

Immediately, the Oceanarium's trainers were out on the scene, feeding their dolphins and plotting how to rescue them.

"They wouldn't leave, I mean they were flipping, they were jumping, they hadn't had food for two weeks," Solangi said. "They don't have FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], they don't have anybody else but their trainers."

The hope is to teach the animals to leap onto mats and then into boats so they can be transferred to pools the Navy is bringing in. A dolphin rescue team from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association is helping in the effort.

"Many of the dolphins are already trained to come up on their stomachs, we call that beaching," said Delphine Vanderpool, a dolphin trainer at the Marine Life Oceanarium. "If we can get some of them to beach on the mat, that would be great."

"It looks really good for at least six of the animals," said Jeff Foster, who is part of the NOAA team. "Two are a little standoffish."

The dolphins who don't learn how to jump onto the mats will be rescued by nets, Vanderpool said.

"All of them have lost weight," Vanderpool added. "But right now, they seem to be doing well.

To learn more about the Marine Life Oceanarium and its dolphins, visit www.dolphinsrus.com.

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