



Has Anyone Seen My Sea Lions? Dolphins?

Gulfport Aquarium Missing Mammals After Hurricane

Sep. 4, 2005 - In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, many pet owners are searching for beloved dogs and cats, or caring for their injuries. But Dr. Moby Solangi, owner and director of the Marine Life Oceanarium in Gulfport, Miss., is in a race against time to save seven dolphins and seven sea lions swept away in the storm.

Solangi estimates his missing mammals can only survive about a week to 10 days out of captivity because they will have trouble finding food. He has said he won't rest until he finds them.

"These are domesticated animals and some are captive-borns, and they don't have the hunting skills," he said.

Dolphins in the Hotel Swimming Pool

Once Solangi realized how severe Katrina was going to be, he 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 the other three made the pool at the Holiday Inn their home during the storm. They've all since been transferred to the Gulfarium, an aquarium in Fort Walton Beach, Fla.

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.

So far, only one has been found -- a baby dolphin was rescued from a muddy pool in a nearby golf course. The baby, doing just fine, was sent to Panama City, Fla.

Solangi and his team have been searching for the missing dolphins by going out in boats and using high-pitched training whistles. The hope is that the dolphins will hear the familiar whistle and surface.

'We Found Sea Lions All Over the Place.'

Since sea lions don't require water, nine of them -- again, as many as time allowed -- were evacuated from the aquarium to a warehouse, where they rode out the storm sitting in crates. But the rest were swept away into the floodwaters when Katrina hit.

As of now, eight of the 15 missing sea lions have been recovered and joined the others, which had been transferred to Sea World in Orlando.

"We found the sea lions all over the place," Solangi said. "People's front yards, front porches, under an SUV."

The woman who found the sea lion under her SUV coaxed the animal into her kiddie pool, and then fed her frozen fish she had stored in her freezer.

But these sea lions -- even though they're usually docile and well-trained -- can be dangerous if you scare them, warned Solangi. That's one reason why he's looking for them with such urgency.

"These are also wild animals," he said. "They could hurt you, so please respond, let the appropriate agent know these animals are there and we will send a team to recover them."

When the Oceanarium staff gets a call that a sea lion has been spotted, "most of us are crying because we're so happy they're OK," said Elizabeth Sack, the aquarium's marine mammal trainer.

Then the rescue mission begins. They coax the sea lions into crates and move them to a warehouse.

"One warehouse that's still intact is letting us keep sea lions there until we can get them to Sea World," Sack said.

Solangi said they are still trying to figure out where the displaced dolphins and sea lions will stay during the 18 to 24 months he estimates it will take him to rebuild his aquarium.

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