

## Stranding

On Tuesday I was at the hospital with my husband who was having eye surgery when I received a surprise phone call from George saying a pilot whale had stranded over by Jan Thiel. I was a bit surprised because it is not a species we see all that often off of our coastline. George was going to head over and check out the situation. I got my husband home afterwards, put him to bed and raced over to the beach. At this point no one knew anything, weather the whale was actually on the beach or swimming, sick or injured. What we found out was that it was a juvenile and was alone, it was very thin and no immediate injuries were noticed. This is a species that normally runs in large groups, so finding a solo animal is very unusual. It was almost sunset at this point and the decision was to wait until morning and re-asses the situation. I headed home to take care of my husband once again.

The following morning we had an entire emergency team headed by George Kieffer and supported by the staff of Dolphin Academy, Sea Aquarium and CDTC at the Zanzibar beach. The whale stranded itself in the morning and the team went into action going into the water to support it so it could breathe and rest. An adjacent holding pool was set up. Now a complete physical was done and body condition assessed. The whale was extremely emaciated but had little other external injuries other than a few scratches from the rocks. It was too weak to hold itself up though, so groups were organized and stood in waist deep water to support the whale. Some very nice families offered their children's toy "noodles" and we placed those under the whale for additional support.

My personal worries were of course, just what made this whale feel so bad as to leave its group and strand? Were we going to be able to diagnose it in time? Were we going to have the skills and knowledge to help it? Were we going to have the staffing to not only work one day, but 24 hours a day for possibly several weeks? And on a lighter note, if I was standing in the water all day, who would walk my dogs?! So, I had a day off with my husband at the hospital, and spent 8 hours a day in the water for the next two days! But, it will be one of the most memorable things I have even done, professionally and personally.

Through the last days the whale has been determined to be a male pilot whale, about 10 feet long and approximately 3-4 years old. We have been giving it lots of fluids by means of a tube and funnel. Whales don't drink salt water; they get their fresh water from the fish they eat. But, this whale was very, very thin and very dehydrated. He was given antibiotics and blood was taken to check for infection and organ function.

For me one of the most amazing things is to see how the SCCN, Dolphin Academy, Sea Aquarium, Zanzibar and local volunteers came in to work together for a common good. It really did not matter where you were from, just that you wanted to help. We have had children walk up to trainers and give them money for food and water and offer their help. We have had local organizations step up also with many volunteers and food or money support. When you stand in the water for hour after hour, face to face with a stranger, very shortly they become a friend.

I have been working for the aquarium for the last five years. I am a dolphin trainer. Working with marine mammals is all I have ever wanted to do. I am from America, but have worked internationally in Honduras and Mexico before moving to Curacao. I have known George for many, many years. We worked together in Roatan, Honduras. It is ironic, because we had a stranded pilot whale there also. However by the time I got there she was rehabilitated and healthy. George was a part of that stranding, so he has that experience to add to his wealth of knowledge. I feel really lucky to have George leading this process. He is very calm, gives precise instructions, says jokes at just the right “stressful” moments and instills confidence in his team. We are very fortunate to have him here. I don’t think he has slept two consecutive hours since last Tuesday, he just can’t be anywhere else; his own mind and heart just won’t let him be anywhere else. I guess that pretty much goes for the rest of us also. We have put our lives on hold. There are no days off, no going to the movies, no happy hours. Every spare moment is spent at the whale. It’s not that we have to be there, it’s just that we don’t want to be anywhere else! As far as my staff and myself, we are trying to alternate trainers sent over to the whale in order to run our programs as well as give the trainers some rest time.

One of the best things is the outpouring of volunteer we have had. It is impossible for only the trained personnel to be there each and every minute. We were able to support the whale in the water with about four people, two at the front, one in the middle, one at the tail. So, we put two professionals in the water with two volunteers. It worked out so great because it eased the workload off of the core staff and it involved the public. It let them get up close and personal and to see, feel and learn about this amazing animal! One of the most important things, I believe, that has already come out of this situation is the increased awareness of the local dolphins and whales around Curacao. With more interest there will be more conservation and protection of the animals and their ocean home. It was great to stand next to someone and see their eyes light up with their first touch. It was both amazing and humbling to get to be a part of this.

So, as of now that beautiful whale is eating on its own, by hand from George who floats on a surfboard. He has an infection on his tail from the scratches, but the vets and staff are right on top of that. He is still getting antibiotics, but is no longer dehydrated and feels good enough to swim on his own. It is a slow start, and views are still conservative about his future, but for today he is doing better. And each and every day he gets a little bit stronger.

- Aimee Brown -