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Volunteers nurse stranded pilot whales in Florida Keys

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Standing face to face with a 975-pound pilot whale, Pam Childers coos as she hand feeds little silver fish into the black mammal's toothy mouth shortly after dawn.

Childers gently whispers "Here you go, good girl," as the whale rolls on its side, exposing its chin to be rubbed. Upside down, its closed mouth looks like a smile, reflecting the faces of the five volunteers hovering around her in the shallow water.

The whale's official name is No. 3, but she is alternately called Angel and Jaws, depending on whether she bites the volunteers along with her breakfast. This day she is Angel.

Angel is one of 28 pilot whales that beached themselves April 18 in the Florida Keys. It's unclear why the whales stranded. Eight died, six were euthanized and nine swam away.

Five whales are left recovering under the 24-hour watch of volunteers. They could be released in perhaps two weeks, if blood tests show they are healthy and they can be taken off antibiotics, said Rick Trout, director of animal care at the Marine Mammal Conservancy.

Until then, the five whales are penned into a local swimming hole - a natural lagoon as long as a football field about 30 miles north of Key West.

On shore, a small tent city of folding tables and trailers has sprung up to hold medical supplies for the whales and food for volunteers.

Dozens of wet suits hang on a clothes line and flippers and life jackets lay out in the sun to dry. Blankets and pillows are strewn about on plastic chairs, left behind by volunteers who monitor the whales for days at a time.

The rescue operation is run entirely by volunteers and is overseen by National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration fisheries. The agency gives permission to the marine organizations and volunteers to touch the protected species, otherwise a federal offense.

But this stranding, one of the largest in the region in recent years, has taxed the volunteer network and drawn some criticism.

The day the whales beached, volunteers looked for a suitable place to contain the whales, but poor communication prevented the group from going to a nearby location that was being prepared, Trout said. Instead the whales were taken to a place farther away.

The wasted time prevented volunteers from containing all the animals - some swam away that should have been assessed by marine experts and possibly rehabilitated, Trout said. It's possible those animals died at sea.

"No one has seen them yet - that's probably going to continue to remain an open question," Trout said.

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The first night, volunteers and veterinarians left the water at dusk, concerned about sharks. When they returned, the jaws of two dead whales had been removed with a knife - a federal crime because the whales are protected. Experts figure someone removed the jaws for the whales' teeth or as souvenirs.

Some of the whales that died immediately were necropsied and then taken to an uninhabited island, tied to the mangroves there by their tails and left to rot. The tails of two broke off the carcasses drifted away, one washing ashore in a Keys' backyard. It was removed 10 days later.

But at the lagoon with the whales splashing nearby, difficulties with the stranding are overshadowed by the challenges of luring the whales into the hands of volunteers for the next feeding and keeping the schools of hundreds of snappers, attracted by the whale food, from biting bare fingers in the water. In addition, donations and volunteers are needed to keep the program going.

All the medicine, equipment and food - herring, Columbia River smelt and caplin - are donated, which would have cost tens of thousands of dollars, said Denise Jackson, stranding coordinator for the Florida Keys Marine Mammal Rescue Team.

"We have to beg, borrow and steal everything," Jackson said.

Visitors are greeted by an eraser board with a wish list of donations, asking for fins and flippers, toilet paper, and "clones for staff."

Initially, 150 volunteers were needed each day to hold up the whales because they were too weak to swim by themselves, Jackson said. The whales have regained their strength - one broke Trout's rib with its powerful tail when he was taking a blood sample.

Now only eight to 10 volunteers are needed for each four-hour shift during the day, and one person monitors the whales at night. Some volunteers hold plastic barriers in the water to corral the whales, others hold them during feedings, hand feed the whales or help prepare the food.

"It's so magical," said Betty Brothers, a Keys resident who visits the whales and volunteers daily, bringing food, money and other donations. "It's so energizing to have people the way they are - coming in, sacrificing their time, their abilities."

One volunteer, 21-year-old Shaun Tamosaitis, quit his job waiting tables and bartending in Colchester, Conn., and moved to Florida to help care for the whales. Tamosaitis is staying with his sister in Key West and living off his tax refund.

"It's been a dream come true for me," said Tamosaitis, who wants to study marine biology. "I'm having the time of my life."

On the Net:

Marine Mammal Conservatory: <http://www.marinemammalconsrv.org/>

National Marine Fisheries Service: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/>

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