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NAUTICAL NEWS

April 26, 2007

40 marine animals thought to be suffering from domoic acid poisoning found within past month

The public is urged to stay away from infected animals who may appear disoriented

BY PAT REYNOLDS

In the past five days, 11 marine mammals, all suffering with what is thought to be domoic acid poisoning, have been brought to local veterinarians after being rescued by the Whale Rescue Team.

Over the past month, more than 40 animals have turned up in odd locations, acting abnormally, but in a behavior that's consistent with the ingestion of domoic acid, a toxin that breeds in specific algae blooms and causes a range of debilitating afflictions.

While some animals suffering with this toxin look sickly, frail and weak, others can appear to the unknowing as healthy and robust. Since the contaminant attacks both the physical and the neurological regions, there are instances where a sea lion will appear on a beach or other public area and seem almost tame, when the truth is it may well be disoriented and dangerous.

"You see these big, plump healthy-looking animals coming up — people think they're healthy," said Whale Rescue Team founder Peter Wallerstein, who has directed thousands of mammal and sea bird rescues in the area over many years.

"But then you start looking more closely and you can see their eyes are bugging out of their heads and their heads are rolling — it's a more neurological recognition."

Among the 11 mammals that were rescued this past week, four were dolphins that didn't survive. In Wallerstein's experience, the fact that dolphins are being affected to this extent is an indication of this being a particularly deadly bloom.

"I believe this is a sign of just how potent the bloom is," he said. "And how many dolphins aren't making it to shore?"

He continued, "In the past years, 95 percent of the domoic rescues were pregnant females, but this year it appears to be indiscriminating."

"We're getting a lot of animals that have what we feel are symptoms consistent with domoic acid," said Marine Mammal Center's Lauren Palmer, a veterinarian who treats these rescued animals. "Right now I feel we are having a bloom event because we have so many different animals and so many different species."

According to a report entitled Pathology of Domoic Acid Toxicity in California

Sea Lions, the neurotoxin is produced by certain marine algae during "harmful algae blooms" and is subsequently eaten by "filter feeders" such as mussels and anchovies — the latter being a staple of many seabird and marine mammal diets. Once an animal has ingested the toxin, in more severe cases, it typically endures seizures, paralysis and ultimately death.

In 2005 there was another outbreak that caused mass strandings and casualties among Southern California marine life. Reports of exhausted, disoriented seals and sea lions were rampant and Wallerstein was running from San Pedro to Malibu every day trying to keep up with the influx.

"I had 294 rescues that year — in June of 2005 I did 89 sea lion rescues," said Wallerstein. "Last year was much more mild — not as many dolphin. This year its much more potent."

Unfortunately, it seems the blight is only just beginning. Statistics indicate the toxin appears to be more common in females, particularly pregnant females, and June is the month when sea lions give birth. Given these circumstances, it seems likely that many more mammals, especially suffering sea lions, will be heading for the shore in an attempt to shake off their sickness.

"Were going to have another month or so of very disoriented, sick sea lions washing up on L.A. County," said Wallerstein in a heavy tone.

Beyond the scope of these threatened animals, domoic acid is also a concern for humans for many of the same reasons.

In 1987 four people died in Canada after eating contaminated mussels infected with domoic acid, and since then more attention has been put towards monitoring the blooms. There has also been a greater effort within the scientific community to explore how human impact is affecting the frequency and intensity of these events.

"Its a natural occurrence, but for sure, human impact makes the situation worse," said Dr. Maddalena Bearzi, founder of the Ocean Conservation Society in Marina del Rey. "We have a lot more algae blooms than we have had in the past — I think these outbreaks are a lot worse than they used to be, and it seems that they happen more often."

Typically, a bloom lasts about a month and unfortunately can do a lot of damage in that span of time.

Wallerstein expects to be incredibly busy for the next few weeks and hopes that the public will be mindful that although these creatures may appear docile, they can inflict a devastating bite and should be seen as highly dangerous.

He also warns that dogs should be kept clear of a beached animal, for it could be the difference between the sick animal living or dying.

In the event of an emergency involving a seabird or marine mammal, call (800) 39-WHALE.

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