

Baby dolphin survives crap trap

Swimming idly in a private pool and getting sunscreen rubbed on her back, is how the baby, Atlantic bottlenose dolphin, Winter, has been spending her days after losing her tail to a crab trap.

The 3-month-old dolphin is on a steady road to recovery after suffering dehydration and sever cuts and bruises from entanglement in a crab trap line, said Lori Olson, dolphin trainer at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium.

Winter was swimming off the east coast of Florida in Mosquito Lagoon with her mother and the rest of her pod when she got stuck and was left behind.

“The bond between a mother and baby is very strong, but her mother knew there was nothing she could do to help her baby. She had to move on with the rest of the pod,” Olson said.

Rescuers from the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution responded to the emergency animal call on Dec. 10, 2005. It was estimated by aquarium workers that Winter was caught in the trap for 36 hours before she was found and freed.

Winter was transported to the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, where she has been for more than a month under the close supervision of trainers and veterinarian care.

Winter came into the facility with deep wounds on her mouth, pectoral fins and peduncle or tail stalk. A few days later, the extensive tissue damage and lack of blood flow to her lower peduncle caused her entire tail to fall off.

“When she first got here, we were just hoping Winter would survive,” Olson said. “She is starting to gain back weight, so that is a really good sign.”

Winter now weighs 76 pounds, compared to the 66 pounds she weighed in December, her lowest weight at the aquarium.

Although her age and disability will prevent her from ever being released, with all the attention Winter gets at the aquarium, it doesn't look like she minds.

She is very friendly and loves people and getting her belly rubbed, according to trainers at the aquarium.

The first few days at the aquarium, Winter had to be held up to the surface by trainers so she wouldn't drown. The trainers took shifts and stayed up with Winter 24 hours a day until she was able to support herself again.

She has quickly learned to compensate for her new handicap. She now moves more like a shark, swaying her tiny body side to side.

Winter can even swim to the bottom of her 3-foot-deep pool to play with the feet of her trainers.

However, the side-to-side motion Winter makes when she tries to swim may lead to muscular-skeletal deformities, Olson said.

Winter's condition is rapidly improving and her wounds are almost completely healed. However, the aquarium is beginning to look into the possibility of making her a prosthetic tail, to help prevent possible malformations as she matures.

"It has only been done twice before, that I know of," Olson said.

At an aquarium in Japan, a dolphin named Fiji was successfully fitted with a new tail, after her own had to be amputated due to disease.

Her new tail was manufactured by the tire company Bridgestone and has enabled Fiji to jump again, according to the Dolphin World website.

Although Winter's situation is very different from Fiji's, they hope to give back to her a somewhat normal swimming ability.

The development and creation of Winter's new tail will be a collaboration of a group of specialists, said Abby Stone, dolphin trainer at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium.

The aquarium is hoping to get individuals and universities to take on this extensive task, Stone said.

It will likely require numerous trial-and-error test runs, Olson said.

This project will be funded completely by private donations and university grants. It is expected to cost approximately 100,000 dollars, because Winter will need several new tails as she grows, according to the aquarium.

The more Winter's condition improves, the more the trainers look forward to do formal training with her, and introducing her to Panama, Nicholas and Indy, the other rehabilitated dolphins now living at the aquarium.

"We would love for Winter to stay here," said Olson. "She will be a great learning tool to bring more awareness and get people to support the work we do"