



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: The Marine Mammal Center: Giancarlo Rulli (415) 754-4012 // Media@tmmc.org

San Francisco Bay Area a hotspot for marine mammal harassment, experts say

Experts at The Marine Mammal Center saw more than 25 percent of their patients in 2022 rescued due to negative interactions by humans and dogs along the Center's 600-mile California response range – part of a wider issue of wildlife interference by humans along the California coastline

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – June 5, 2023) – The Marine Mammal Center, the world's largest marine mammal hospital, reports that data gathered last year on the impact of human wildlife interaction highlights a complex and concerning threat for marine mammals in the San Francisco Bay Area and along the California coast.

The Center reports that wildlife harassment by people and dogs was a contributing or direct factor in more than 150 cases of marine mammals being rescued and admitted to the Center's Sausalito hospital in 2022. This accounts for 27 percent of all patients admitted last year. The data also reveals that these incidents were just as prevalent in the summer and fall as they were during the Center's busy spring pupping season.

In the San Francisco Bay Area specifically, illegal pickups of harbor seal pups in Marin County and human and dog interactions with young seals and sea lions in San Francisco and San Mateo County were the standout harassment case examples.

A tragic case that illustrates the impact harassment can have on a marine mammal's life is the story of a harbor seal named Snowcone. This male pup who was young enough to still be nursing was rescued in April 2022 at Shell Beach in Sonoma County after being illegally picked up and separated from its mother by two beachgoers. Unfortunately, trained Center responders noted upon arrival to the scene that the pup had suffered severe head trauma consistent with a dog attack. This incident likely occurred after the animal was moved away from the established rookery, or breeding area, to a part of the beach with numerous off-leash dogs. The pup sadly died as a result of its injuries on the way to the Center's hospital.

“While the overall numbers of marine mammal harassment cases within the San Francisco Bay Area were less than those along the Central Coast, we unfortunately saw more severe cases of harassment locally,” says Adam Ratner, Associate Director of Conservation Education. “The tragic case of Snowcone highlights that we have a community that loves marine mammals and wants to help them. But the only way to ensure the safety and wellbeing of these animals is to first call the experts and keep a safe distance until trained responders arrive.”

While crowding is the most prevalent form of harassment range-wide, a significant number of harassment cases were more severe, including dragging the animal, touching it, attempting to feed it or pouring water on it. Harassment by dogs accounted for more than a quarter of all cases.

“While on the surface, taking a close-up selfie or having your dog off-leash near a marine mammal may seem cute and innocent, it can create real challenges, especially for young seals and sea lions,” says Ratner. “These behaviors can separate young pups from their mothers, increase stress and potentially increase the risk for disease transmission between people and animals.”

Now armed with strong baseline data to make year-over-year comparisons going forward, the Center’s team is utilizing a multi-pronged approach this year to address the issue of human wildlife interaction, including working with behavior change experts. These initial efforts include trying to reach beachgoers, tourists and small businesses in key interaction hot-spot areas with information about how to safely share our shores and local waterways with marine wildlife.

More specifically, The Marine Mammal Center is also seeking to identify the following:

- Motivations for problematic behaviors such as touching, moving, harassing or taking up-close selfies with marine mammals
- Attitudes, knowledge and demographics associated with such behaviors and the consequences of these problematic actions
- Leaders in the community who can help spread the message of how to protect marine mammals

As the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, The Marine Mammal Center would like to remind the public that they play an important role in the conservation of marine mammals by keeping these safe wildlife viewing tips in mind:

Keep Your Distance. Give marine mammals space to rest by enjoying them from a safe distance both on local beaches and in the water, and keeping dogs on a leash.

Use Your Zoom. It’s OK to take photos and admire the animals, but if an animal reacts to your presence, then you’re too close. No SEAL-FIES please!

Call the Experts. If you see a marine mammal in distress, do not intervene. Instead, call The Marine Mammal Center’s hotline at 415-289-SEAL (7325). Our experts will monitor the animal and, if necessary, send trained responders to rescue it safely.

Harassment Breakdown by County (all species):

Santa Cruz – 35 cases (21% of all cases)

Monterey – 31 cases (19% of all cases)

San Luis Obispo – 30 cases (18% of all cases)

San Mateo – 21 cases (13% of all cases)

San Francisco – 13 cases (8% of all cases)

Marin – 12 cases (7% of all cases)

Sonoma – 8 cases (5% of all cases)

Mendocino – 1 case (1% of all cases)

Solano – 1 case (1% of all cases)

ABOUT THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER:

The Marine Mammal Center is a global leader in marine mammal health, science and conservation, and is the largest marine mammal hospital in the world. As a leading contributor to the global body of research and knowledge about marine mammal medicine and ocean health, the Center generates research findings and scientific outputs at volumes comparable to top academic institutions and prides itself on gathering and providing open research data that is free to access, reuse, repurpose and redistribute. The Center's teaching hospital and training programs operate globally with headquarters in Sausalito, CA. The Center has rescued more than 24,000 marine mammals from 600 miles of authorized rescue area along the California coastline and the Big Island of Hawai'i. The Center's mission is to advance global ocean conservation through marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation, scientific research, and education.

For more information, please visit MarineMammalCenter.org. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).