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Blair Mase: Coordinating the rescue of marine mammals

By Partnership for Public Service January 6

When reports come in about whales, dolphins or other marine mammals stranded on a beach or tangled in debris in waters in the coastal waters of the Southeast, Blair Mase goes to work.

One of five regional coordinators with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Mase manages a network of volunteer responders who head to the scene to help the animals and determine what happened.

“A lot of times the calls come to me and I distribute them to our network or coordinate the Coast Guard and the networks,” said Mase, who has served as NOAA’s regional marine mammal coordinator in the Southeast since 1996 and has been at NOAA since 1992. “The volunteer organizations are the boots on the ground that collect the data.”

If the animals are alive, a quick response is important for saving them, she said. It’s also important for experts to determine the cause of death and the physiology and biology of the deep-water marine animals, which are difficult to study far out in the ocean.

“Dolphins can be a sentinel for human health,” Mase said. “If waters are so toxic that they’re affecting the most sentinel species in the ecosystem, it’s a wakeup call for us as humans as well.”

It’s not always known what causes marine mammals to get stranded, but some causes include disease, parasite infestation and harmful algal blooms. For Mase, saving an animal is gratifying. “It’s one small piece of the puzzle, but it keeps me going,” she said.

Each year, thousands of marine mammals die from stranding. “It occurs all along the coastline at any given moment or day,” Mase said.

She mentioned the recent stranding of a pygmy sperm whale in North Carolina, a dolphin washed up on a Florida Keys beach and two entangled dolphins in the Indian River Lagoon on Florida’s Atlantic Coast.

“These animals garner a lot of public interest,” said Megan Stolen, research scientist with Hubbs-Seaworld Research Institute in Florida. “Blair is the conduit between the public and the scientific community collecting data. She has a way of making everyone feel at ease in difficult situations.”

The level of attention to these stranding incidents increases when large numbers of marine mammals get stuck. And the media and the public are more likely to get involved, such as in December 2013 when a pod of pilot whales got beached in the Florida Everglades.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/federal_government/blair-mase-coordinating-the-rescue-of-marine-mammals/2015/01/06/ccbadaec-95b2-11e4-8005-1924ede3e54a_story.html

The response to numerous stranded animals at once requires a team of about 40 people and several vessels, Mase said. State and local organizations stand by in case they need to encircle the animal with a net, and paramedics are on hand in case responders get hurt performing the often dangerous work.

Before NOAA started coordinating the response and information gathering, different states and regions collected data in different databases—making it difficult to access and use efficiently. **The centralized data at the federal level is more valuable, Stolen said.**

“It really became consistent and trustworthy and highly valued,” she said. “Everyone inputs into the database and it’s searchable.”

In between crises, Mase works with other regional coordinators to develop policies and guidelines for the release and rehabilitation of the marine mammals. She also helps compile a large collection of data to determine whether the animals have been affected by humans or fisheries, information that helps with mitigation efforts and policy.

“We’re constantly learning as much as possible so we can make better decisions about the populations we’re trying to conserve,” she said.

Mase grew up in Vero Beach, Fla., and at age 11 made a decision on her life’s work the day the self-described early riser came upon a beached whale when no one else was around.

“I remember running back home and my mother calling Seaworld or the marine patrol,” Mase said. “They said to keep it wet. Literally, I was the only one on the beach for hours, keeping the whale wet.”

Sea World managed to get the whale back into the ocean alive. “It left a big impression on me,” Mase said.

Mase hopes that through her role in marine mammal conservation, she is helping raise awareness and educating others on the effect people have on the world’s oceans. “The more we are able to understand how we humans are impacting our oceans and species, the more we are able to find ways to implement change,” she said.

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