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Behavior change needed: 30 percent of marine mammal patients rescued by The Marine Mammal Center in 2023 experienced some form of human or dog disturbance

The Center reports that year over year data highlights these interactions are both a tourist and a local issue according to beach survey data conducted by experts.

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – April 24, 2024) – The Marine Mammal Center, the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, reports that internal data gathered the last two years on the impact of [human-wildlife interaction](#) highlights a complex and concerning threat for marine mammals along 600 miles of California coast and inland areas.

The Center’s Electronic Animal Record System team reports that wildlife disturbance by people and dogs was a contributing or direct factor in more than 200 cases of marine mammals being rescued and admitted to the Center’s Sausalito hospital in 2023. This accounts for 30 percent of all patients admitted last year, up from 26 percent in 2022.

Of the 200 plus cases of disturbance last year, people getting too close was the most common form of behavioral disturbance the Center’s experts documented and increased from 2022. This type of behavior, which involves crowding around an animal and not giving it appropriate space, can lead to increased stress levels, separate moms from their pups, and disrupt rescue operations -- hindering the Center’s goal to give these sick and or injured marine mammals a second chance at life.

The Center is utilizing a multi-pronged approach this year, including continued work with behavior change experts, to address the issue of human-wildlife interaction. These initial efforts have identified factors behind specific beachgoer behavior, and are part of a wider plan to engage with 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.

“Marine mammal disturbance along our vast 600-mile California response range is both a tourist and a local issue that we’re dedicating more resources toward to help find solutions,” says Adam Ratner, Director of Conservation Engagement at The Marine Mammal Center. “Our research shows that the vast majority of people on the beaches want to help these animals, but they don’t know how to best help. Our work is focused on trying to help empower them to take the right actions to protect marine mammals.”

Two core groups were identified by behavior change experts, utilizing both in-person beach and online surveys. The first archetype, “the wildlife protector” mostly represents a local individual trying to help because of their passion for wildlife, but can unfortunately they take actions that result in more harm for the animal. The other identified archetype, “the experience seeker,” largely represents a tourist seeking out an experience with marine life and is heavily influenced by what they see on social media.

In the San Francisco Bay Area specifically, interactions with sick, older California sea lions last fall stood out in large part due to an outbreak of leptospirosis, a bacterial infection that can cause kidney failure and death in sea lions. These behaviors can increase stress to an already sick animal and potentially increase the risk for disease transmission between people and animals.

Thunder, a juvenile male California sea lion, rescued on July 16, 2023, at Ocean Beach in San Francisco, is a standout case that highlights the impact of disturbance. A member of the public reported to the Center’s hotline that people were trying to feed the sea lion and off-leash dogs were also nearby. Trained volunteer responders who arrived on scene found the sea lion in poor body condition and immediately initiated a safe rescue. Thunder was treated for leptospirosis, malnutrition, and other ailments. The sea lion was successfully released back to the wild in Point Reyes National Seashore on September 20, 2023.

Similar to 2022, last year’s 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.

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 of at least 150 feet both on local beaches and in the water, and keeping dogs on a leash.

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.

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!

2023 Disturbance Breakdown by County (all species):

Breakdown by County in 2023	# of disturbance cases (203)	% of disturbance cases
San Luis Obispo	27	13%
Monterey	63	31%
Santa Cruz	51	25%
San Mateo	21	10%
Marin	14	7%
San Francisco	9	4%
Sonoma	12	6%
Mendocino	5	2%
Solano	0	0%
Alameda	1	0%

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 and Maui. The Center's mission is to advance global ocean conservation through marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation, scientific research, and education.

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