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The Marine Mammal Center reports high levels of marine mammal disturbance in Central and Northern California for third year in a row

Data shows 26 percent of marine mammal patients rescued by the Center in 2024 experienced some form of human or dog disturbance on local beaches

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – June 10, 2025) – The Marine Mammal Center, the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, reports that internal data gathered over the last three 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 identified that wildlife disturbance by people or dogs was reported (or noted) in more than 250 cases, equating to 26 percent of all marine mammals rescued and admitted to the Center’s Sausalito hospital in 2024.

Importantly, the disturbance data shows consistency for three years running (26-30% of annual cases), providing a baseline that is critical for highlighting the severity of the issue in various counties and refining public calls to action to create positive behavior change.

Of the more than 250 cases of disturbance last year, people getting too close to sick or injured marine mammals was again the most common form of behavioral disturbance the Center's experts documented. This behavior, which involves crowding around an animal and not giving it appropriate space, can lead to increased stress levels for the animal, separate moms from their pups, and disrupt response operations by forcing animals back to the water or to alternate locations -- hindering the Center’s goal to give these sick or injured marine mammals a second chance at life. While the Center’s experts recognize that disturbance is often not the main reason these marine mammals are rescued, these types of disruptive and dangerous behaviors are preventable.

“Our work is focused on finding solutions and dedicating resources to address the complex factors behind marine mammal disturbance along our vast 600-mile California response range,” says Adam Ratner, Director of Conservation Engagement at The Marine Mammal Center. “Our research shows that the overwhelming majority of people are well intentioned and want to help these animals, but they don’t know how and often take the wrong action. We want to empower both tourists and locals alike to take the action that’s best and safest for marine mammals and people alike.”

The Center utilizes a multi-pronged approach to raise shared awareness, including utilizing new research within social science, communication and behavior change, 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 negative human interaction hot spot areas with information about how to safely share our shores and local waterways with marine wildlife.

Utilizing both in-person interviews with beachgoers and online surveys with residents and tourists, two core motivations were identified and serve as the baseline for outreach efforts. The first archetype, “the wildlife protector,” mostly represents a local individual trying to help because of their passion for wildlife but can unfortunately 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 Marin County specifically, severe disturbance cases with fragile harbor seal and elephant seal pups stood out to experts reviewing the data. Despite a moderate to low number of overall disturbance cases when compared to other counties, half of Marin County’s cases fell into the “severe” category that included physical touching, pouring water on, feeding and moving by people. These behaviors, while often well-intentioned, can lead to increased stress, and life-threatening separations for a dependent harbor seal pup.

Annabelle, a male harbor seal pup rescued on March 26, 2024, near the Sausalito Yacht Club, is a standout case that highlights the impact of disturbance. Trained volunteer responders who arrived on the scene noted the prematurely born animal was vocalizing as multiple people were surrounding it with their barking dogs and taking photos. Given this high degree of human and dog activity nearby, there was no chance of this pup reuniting with their mother and a rescue was immediately initiated. Sadly, Annabelle was humanely euthanized in care by veterinary experts a few days later given her poor prognosis due to cardiac arrhythmia, pneumonia and malnutrition.

Similar to 2022 and 2023, last year’s data also reveals that these incidents were just as prevalent in the summer and fall as they were during harbor seal and elephant seal pupping season in the Spring. It is important to note that a major outbreak of domoic acid toxicosis in San Luis Obispo County contributed to an outsized share of the number of cases in that response region. More than 200 disoriented, lethargic, and seizing sea lions were rescued on busy public beaches in August and September last year.

As the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, The Marine Mammal Center is so thankful for everyone that wants to help protect and care for our local marine mammals. Rather than try and help the animals directly, which can unintentionally cause more harm than good, please follow these guidelines:

- **Keep Your Distance.** Give marine mammals space to rest by enjoying them from a safe distance of at least 150 feet (that’s half a football field) 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!

To learn more about the impact of marine mammal disturbance visit the Center's website or check out the latest Sentinels of the Sea podcast [episode](#) highlighting the issue.

2024 Disturbance Breakdown by County (all species):

Breakdown by County in 2024	# of disturbance cases (257)	% of disturbance cases
San Luis Obispo	80	31%
Monterey	53	21%
Santa Cruz	36	14%
San Mateo	29	11%
Marin	25	10%
San Francisco	16	6%
Sonoma	9	3%
Mendocino	7	3%
Contra Costa	1	<1%
Alameda	1	<1%

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 26,000 marine mammals from 600 miles of authorized rescue area along the California coastline and Hawai'i Island. The Center's mission is to advance ocean health through marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation, research, and education.

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