

DOLPHINS RETURN TO NAVAL VETERINARY CARE IN SAN DIEGO

Two of the three former U.S. Navy dolphins previously held at the Sugarloaf Dolphin Sanctuary in Sugarloaf Key, Fla., known as "Luther" and "Jake," are returning to their former home at the Navy's marine mammal program in San Diego today, the National Marine Fisheries Service announced. Agency officials said the third trained dolphin, known as "Buck," will make the trip after he recovers from a lack of care, substantial weight loss, and wounds he sustained when he was released and abandoned in the wild for nearly two weeks.

The dolphins have been temporarily held by the fisheries service at two separate facilities within the Florida Keys, in response to recent events at Sugarloaf. Buck and Luther were recaptured from the wild by the fisheries service after Sugarloaf deliberately released them into open waters 30 miles from its facility on May 23 without adequate training or the physical condition necessary to survive in the wild. On June 7, officials seized Jake from the Sugarloaf facility after the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service suspended Sugarloaf's license for multiple violations of the Animal Welfare Act, including failure to use qualified veterinary personnel, and the failure to conduct necessary physical examinations and blood tests.

"Although we're extremely disappointed with the Sugarloaf Dolphin Sanctuary's negligent care of the dolphins, and their abandonment of Luther and Buck, we are relieved that all three dolphins are now receiving expert veterinary care," said National Marine Fisheries Service Director Rolland Schmitt.

In addition to health examinations and tests performed by Navy veterinarians during the past several days, all three dolphins were examined yesterday by an independent veterinarian selected by the fisheries service. Both Luther and Jake were found to be in stable health and ready for transport with minimal risk. Buck, however, is clearly in need of additional recovery time and veterinary care before he can be transported.

After examining all available alternatives, the fisheries service decided that assigning custody of these three dolphins to the U.S. Navy's marine mammal program is in the best interest of their health and welfare. In making this decision, the fisheries service gave considerable emphasis to the Navy's extensive experience in the care and handling of these particular animals, and the fact that the Navy's marine mammal program has the resources and the qualified personnel, both experienced marine mammal veterinarians and trainers/handlers, to ensure that these three dolphins are provided the best of care.

After a week in the wild, Luther appeared in waters near Boca Chica Naval Air Station more than 50 pounds underweight and with a six-inch laceration on his right side near the dorsal fin. Buck was spotted off Marathon Shores, Fla., after nearly two weeks in the wild, where he followed rescue boats into an enclosure. Buck is extremely underweight and has a laceration in front of the dorsal fin. Buck remains in serious condition. Jake is also underweight, but is responding well to care provided since his seizure at Sugarloaf.

The fisheries service is in the process of investigating Sugarloaf personnel for their violations under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

"Perhaps in the future a qualified team will submit a legitimate scientific proposal to release captive dolphins into the wild that can pass scientific peer review and agency scrutiny. Most importantly, a release proposal must ensure that such animals are prepared to survive in the wild," said Schmitt.

The rescue operation for Luther and Buck was conducted with the assistance of the U.S. Navy, the Dolphin Research Center, the Marine Mammal Conservancy, and other stranding network volunteers. The Navy provided a team of experienced marine mammal experts to care for Luther and Jake while they were held temporarily in a lagoon near the Boca Chica Naval Air Station. The Boca Chica Naval Air Station provided support and security personnel to ensure the safety of these dolphins. The Dolphin Research Center is providing expert care for Buck during his recovery.

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