

Frequently Asked Questions about The Marine Mammal Stranding Network in the Florida Keys

What is the Southeast Marine Mammal Stranding Network?

The purpose of the Stranding Network is to protect and conserve marine mammals for future generations. The Marine Mammal Stranding Network has been a program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) since it was nationally implemented in 1986. Responses to marine mammal (dolphins, whales, seals, and sea lions) strandings are managed by the NMFS Stranding Network. Responses to distressed manatees are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 1992, Congress granted statutory recognition to the stranding networks in the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Act (MMHSRA), which became Title IV of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

NMFS implements these provisions of the MMPA. Each NMFS Region has a Stranding Coordinator who facilitates response efforts and streamlines communication among Network volunteers, scientists and government agencies. The Florida Keys are within the NMFS Southeast Regional Network. Stranding Network members are trained and experienced volunteers who are authorized by NMFS to respond to stranded or distressed marine mammals. Because the MMPA prohibits the “take” (which includes harassment, hunting, touching, killing or molesting, or attempting any of these activities) of any marine mammal without proper authorization, the Regional Administrator provides written authorization required by network volunteers in a Letter of Agreement (LOA). LOAs for the Florida Keys are maintained by the NMFS Southeast Regional Office in St. Petersburg, Florida.

What is the purpose of the Southeast Marine Mammal Stranding Network?

The overall goal of the Stranding Network is to act in the best interest of the animal. This is accomplished by:

- Providing humane treatment and medical care for live stranded marine mammals.
- Providing immediate response to marine mammal strandings and unusual events.
- Gathering the maximum amount of scientific information from both live and dead animals.
- Facilitating communication among Stranding Network partners for exchanges of information regarding the medical care and rehabilitation of animals.
- Establishing a national reporting system and the National Marine Mammal Tissue Bank to assess trends in the health of marine mammal populations by correlating health with physical, chemical, and biological variables in the environment.

Who may respond to marine mammal strandings?

Because dolphins and whales are protected species under the MMPA, NMFS authorizes qualified organizations to respond to strandings through a Letter of Agreement (LOA). Organizations must meet certain criteria and guidelines mandated by the MMPA to obtain an LOA. The LOA lays out the roles and responsibilities of the Network member and of NMFS. Currently, NMFS is revising and consolidating LOAs nationwide with the goal of streamlining communication and more clearly defining the authority and reporting requirements of LOA holders. This revision is expected to be completed by January 2003. Until the revised LOAs are finalized, Regional Administrators are only issuing new LOAs in areas without network participants. No new LOAs have been issued in the Southeast Region in over four years.

Are there any local organizations that are authorized to respond to stranding events?

The Florida Keys has four organizations that are authorized to respond to stranding events. These organizations provide countywide coverage of the Florida Keys, and are:

Dolphin Research Center, Middle Keys (305) 289-1121

Florida Keys Marine Mammal Rescue Team, Lower Keys (305) 745-8785
Marine Animal Rescue Society, Upper and Middle Keys (305) 919-5503
Dolphins Plus (Marine Mammal Rescue Foundation), Upper Keys (305) 451-1993

To further increase coverage of the area and provide quick response, each LOA organization has qualified "designees." Designees must demonstrate experience and training in the rescue of stranded marine mammals, and must be qualified to assess and respond to stranding events. Local designees often provide first response to a stranding event, while other LOA organizations and volunteers gather equipment and support. There are presently 33 designees approved throughout Monroe County.

Are there local organizations authorized to rehabilitate stranded marine mammals in the Florida Keys?

Two organizations, the Florida Keys Marine Mammal Rescue Team (Lower Keys) and Marine Animal Rescue Society (Upper Keys) have the added authority to rehabilitate marine mammals in the Florida Keys. On average, only two live whale or dolphin strandings that require rehabilitation efforts occur each year in the Keys. Rarely, a mass stranding of live dolphins or whales may also occur in the Keys. See the information below regarding stranding numbers.

How do I volunteer for the Stranding Network in the Florida Keys?

Anyone can volunteer to assist the Stranding Network. There are hundreds of volunteers throughout the Keys that play an integral part in rescues and rehabilitations. Individuals can volunteer for various local rescue groups that already have authorization to respond to stranding events. For more information, contact the Stranding Network participants listed above.

How many dolphins and whales strand each year in Florida? In the Florida Keys?

The following list details the number of reported strandings in Florida and Monroe County from 1998-2000:

	<u>Florida</u>	<u>Monroe County</u>
1998	67 live 153 dead	2 live 2 dead
1999	16 live 252 dead	1 live 1 dead
2000*	32 live 231 dead	2 live 2 dead

* An estimated 150 dolphins live-stranded during a Florida Keys mass stranding event on January 16-19, 2000. Dolphins were treated and/or released back to the sea. A total of 31 animals died.

What is the Success Rate of the Stranding Network?

The most important factor behind a successful response to a live marine mammal stranding is the humane treatment of the animals. Due to the medical condition of each animal and uniqueness of each stranding, it is impossible to calculate a "success rate" for dolphin and whale rescues. However, valuable information is learned during the rescue and rehabilitation response to every stranded marine mammal. Below are some examples of factors that are considered when evaluating the outcome of a stranding event in terms of survival of the animal:

- The number of animals involved.
- The condition of the marine mammal when found.
- The age of the animal: Very young or very old animals are more susceptible to illness.

- The species of marine mammal: Certain species are "hardier" than others and respond well to treatment.
- The duration of time the animal has been stranded before being reported.
- The cause of the stranding: Illness, diseases, boat-strikes, and entanglements all require various levels of treatment.
- The environmental conditions during the stranding: Time of day, weather conditions, and accessibility to the location may affect reporting and response to the stranding.

Where can I get more information?

Visit the following website:

http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/prot_res/PR2/Health_and_Stranding_Response_Program/mmhsrp.html

Additional Reading:

See publications listed on the above website, as well as:

Geraci, J.R., V.J. Lounsbury. 1998. Field Guide to Marine Mammal Strandings: Texas Sea Grant A&M University Sea Grant College Program, ISBN 1-883550-01-7.

Geraci, J.R., V.J. Lounsbury. Marine Mammals Ashore: A Field Guide to Strandings (CD-ROM), 1998. National Aquarium in Baltimore.

St. Aubin, D.J., J.R. Geraci, J.R., V.J. Lounsbury. 1996. Rescue, Rehabilitation, and Release of Marine Mammals: An Analysis of Current Views and Practices. Proceedings of a Workshop held in Des Plaines, Ill, 3-5 December 1991. NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-OPR-8.