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Opinion and Commentary

The triumphant return of the mother and calf humpback whales to the Pacific Ocean is being celebrated in California and around the country. This event captured the attention of millions of people and, thanks to the efforts of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and our partners; these wayward whales successfully navigated the maze of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

While we celebrate this success story it is important to note that this is an example of NOAA's larger national mission to protect marine mammals. Since the passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972, NOAA has worked to manage and restore marine mammal species that live in our coastal waters. We do not achieve these results on our own however. NOAA works closely with an extensive network of partners to carry out this mission as is evident from our efforts on the Sacramento River.

Soon after the whales were discovered almost 90 miles inland from the Golden Gate Bridge, NOAA joined with the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito to conduct a coordinated rescue effort with California's Department of Fish and Game and Office of Emergency Services, the U.S. Coast Guard, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Cascadia Research Collective, Alaska Whale Foundation and a myriad of other local organizations.

Public interest was keen and within a few days, NOAA received thousands of suggestions on how to return the whales to their feeding grounds in the Pacific Ocean. Our veterinarians, whale scientists and volunteers were equally passionate in their concern for the whales, and employed creative tactics to coax them toward the ocean with minimal stress.

When the veterinarians became concerned about the health of the whales, they worked with pharmaceutical companies and whale biologists from the East Coast to treat them. The veterinarians successfully administered antibiotics, which was the first time antibiotics have been given to free swimming large whales.

Although the humpback whale is an endangered species it has made significant strides in recent years. We believe a key reason this species is rebuilding is due to a better understanding of the population dynamics of the species. Events like this provide opportunities for marine mammal behaviorists and other researchers to obtain new information on how these animals interact. From this

understanding have come concrete strategies to reduce the two main causes of death – ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear.

NOAA's marine mammal protection efforts extend to the international arena as well. We are working with the International Whaling Commission, meeting this week in Anchorage, Alaska, to encourage nations around the world to continue the global effort to protect and rebuild whale populations.

We are leading an international effort to better understand how underwater sound from ships, sonar and other human sources may affect the behavior of marine mammals. And NOAA scientists are studying how harmful algal blooms, loss of sea ice and other environmental changes may affect the health, behavior and survival of whales and other marine mammals.

The saga of these two humpback whales brought NOAA's marine mammal protection mission directly into America's living room. In many respects these animals became ambassadors for our oceans and rivers by highlighting the plight of endangered species and the threats facing marine wildlife.

Currently the Marine Mammal Protection Act is being considered for reauthorization in Congress and NOAA hopes to strengthen regulations to reduce the accidental catching of marine mammals in fishing gear and the enforcement capability of the act. This 35-year old law grew out of concerns voiced by the American public and over the last two weeks, the public has once again demonstrated its concern for these animals.

This passion and the coordinated efforts of the team of rescuers were key elements that helped the humpbacks successfully reach the Pacific Ocean. And we encourage the public to demonstrate the same passion for the larger issues of restoring and protecting all marine mammals along our coasts and around the world.

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***Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and
NOAA Administrator***

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