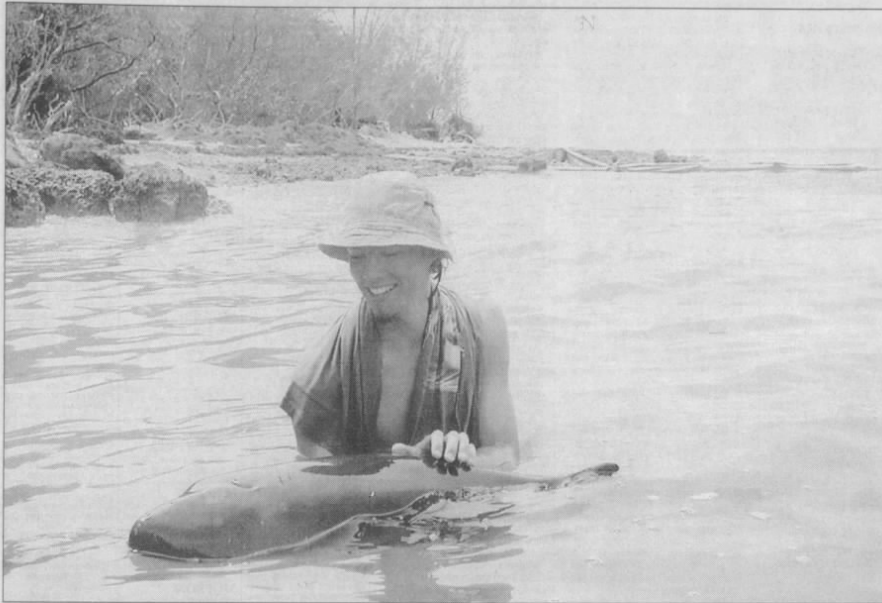


FLA THURSDAY, JUNE 29

THE REGION



LISA FUSS/HERALD STAFF

WHALE PILOT: Volunteer Joakin Strickner helps baby whale "Summer" float Wednesday at Stock Island. Summer was found beached behind Truman Annex.

Volunteers swarm to help sick whale

BY LISA FUSS
lfuss@herald.com

STOCK ISLAND — The fight to save a stranded baby pygmy sperm whale has turned a secluded jetty on Stock Island into a makeshift marine hospital complete with round-the-clock care, a tented operations center and an ever-growing list of wet-suited volunteers.

Last week, the young whale was found stranded on a beach behind Truman Annex in Key West. Dubbed "Summer" because of her discovery on the solstice, the small black whale has since been moved to a protected cove at the City Electric pier on Stock Island, where she has spent the last eight days fighting for life.

Although marine mammal experts say the whale's chance of survival is poor because of her age, health problems and usual deep-water habitat, the prognosis hasn't stopped droves of volunteers from keeping vigil and tak-

ing turns helping her swim and eat.

"The other night, I got in and kept her upright for three hours until my arms hurt," said Karen DeGidio, a volunteer who lives in U.S. Navy housing at the Truman Annex. "I was happy to do it. . . . It's worth all the aching to see her progress."

Denise Jackson, stranding coordinator for Wildlife Rescue of the Florida Keys, said the whale is "not out of the woods by any means" but has improved dramatically since being found. Summer, who is believed to be about 8 months old, must still be held upright to keep her blowhole above water, but she does manage to swim on her own and eats fish gruel every two hours through a feeding tube.

Although the results of viral tests are pending, the whale's blood work shows no sign of infection, said veterinarian Tim Tristan of Marathon Veterinary Clinic. Nevertheless, Summer is dehydrated and weak and faces a long and difficult road to recovery, he

said.

Pygmy sperm whales "are almost impossible to rehabilitate, but we're still keeping our fingers crossed that this one will be an exception," said Tristan, who frequently works with stranded marine mammals in the Keys. "For some reason, they are just more prone to lots of gastrointestinal problems during rehabilitation and generally don't respond well. . . . It's going to be really neat if [Summer] pulls through."

Miami Seaquarium director Robert Rose, who has seen countless success stories with stranded dolphins, turtles and manatees, said the chances of survival for a stranded pygmy sperm whale are slim to none — no matter the quality of care given. In Summer's case, Rose says, her poor outlook is compounded by her being an unweaned juvenile.

In addition, Rose said he knows of no pygmy sperm whales in captivity and none of Summer's age that have

survived beyond four or five weeks.

"You hate to be pessimistic, but the prognosis is not good. Unfortunately, they just don't make it very long," Rose said. "It's certainly not impossible, but I think it's safe to say this one would be a first if it made it. When an animal beaches itself, there's a reason, and it's probably because it's sick in some form or another."

Bare-chested and wet from head to toe, volunteer Joakin Strickner was all smiles during his first whale encounter Wednesday as he walked Summer around in her pen. He knows the odds are stacked against the whale, but Strickner plans to keep coming back.

"She's cute and soft, and she just makes people happy here," said Strickner, who is visiting from Austria. "This is a chance to take care of something from the wild. By looking at her, I don't think she's dying."

Those interested in volunteering with Summer can call Wildlife Rescue of the Florida Keys at 305-296-9035.