

1,931 POUNDS OF MARIJUANA SEIZED



A special agent for U.S. Customs investigates one of the 46 bales of marijuana seized last week off Cuba by the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Dallas. The 1,931 pounds of pot and three suspected drug smugglers were transferred to Customs agents on Sunday by the St. Petersburg-based Coast Guard Cutter Venturous.

Veterinarians more optimistic over pygmy whale's recovery

BY LISA FUSS
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STOCK ISLAND — The fight to save an orphan pygmy sperm whale will enter its fifth week Wednesday — an odds-defying feat, say marine mammal experts who suspect rehabilitation of the stranded calf could continue far longer based on recent medical findings.

Nearly two months ago, the young whale dubbed "Summer" was found stranded on a beach behind Truman Annex in Key West. Since the discovery, the small black female whale, believed to be about 9 months old, has been kept in a protected cove at the City Electric pier on Stock Island. Doves of volunteers have kept vigil and tended to chores as tedious as removing seaweed from her pen.

Although veterinarians were pessimistic about the whale's chance of survival given her age, health problems and species, marine mammal experts are now somewhat optimistic over Summer's recovery.

Dr. Greg Bossart, staff veterinarian at Miami Seaquarium and associate professor at the University of Miami School of Medicine, examined the whale Sunday and said Summer appears to be healthy, other than a

high white blood cell count that is being treated with antibiotics.

Surrounded by a crowd of concerned spectators, Bossart and Palm Beach veterinarian Woody Hayes used a portable ultrasound machine and endoscope to internally explore Summer and check for organ abnormalities or foreign bodies that she might have swallowed. Nothing abnormal or foreign was found, but Bossart insists the whale — which lives in deep water — is still susceptible to disease because of her fragile immune system and new coastal environment.

Stranded whales have often been found to have plastic bags in their stomachs, which prevent digestion and ultimately lead to starvation.

Bossart is awaiting test results on blood taken from Summer that would indicate whether it has early stages of cardiomyopathy, a heart disease that was responsible for the deaths of some 30 adult pygmy sperm whales throughout Florida in recent years. Bossart has researched the disease, a chronic disorder of the heart muscle, in humans and marine mammals and is curious whether it is prevalent in juvenile pygmy sperm whales.

Regardless of the findings, Bossart said Summer's progress should be

applauded.

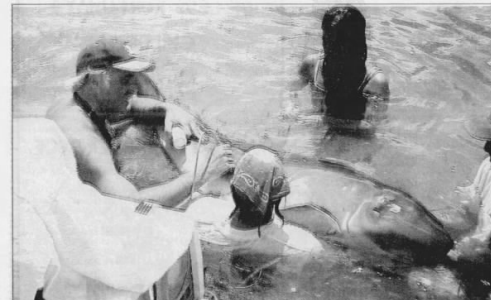
"The fact that this animal has made it this far is extremely rare. Never before has there been an animal of this age that has survived this long," said Bossart, who also serves as director of marine mammal research and conservation at the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce.

"We know so little about this species because of their habitat so we're learning as much from her as she's probably learning from us. . . . She has a tremendous uphill battle to make it to adulthood, but her chances are getting better each day."

Denise Jackson, stranding coordinator for Wildlife Rescue of the Florida Keys, said Summer now swims, dives and chases fish, but must be swined and deemed completely healthy before the possibility of releasing her. Judging by past whale strandings, Jackson said that could be a while. Nearly five years ago, Jackson spent 64 days caring for two stranded pilot whales in Big Pine Key before they could be released.

"It's worth every second," said Jackson. "They become like children to you. You only want the best for them."

To volunteer with Summer, call 305-296-9035.



WHAT'S UP DOC: Dr. Greg Bossart, left, uses a portable ultrasound to check for any foreign bodies inside Summer. Dr. Tim Trexler, right, helped with the exam along with Elaine Allen, top, and Craig Pelton, both of the Marine Animal Rescue Society.