

THE MIAMI HERALD
www.herald.com
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2000
SECTION B

THE KEYS

Home in Keys appears likely for baby dolphin

Its mother died in big stranding

AN ARTIST'S IMAGINATION TAKES FLIGHT



BY LISA FIBBS
Staff Writer

LONG KEY — The baby dolphin found stranded last month on an ocean-side flat off Duck Key may be given a permanent home in the Florida Keys as early as today.

Ralf Mase, a Miami-based marine biologist and southeastern stranding coordinator for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said the young male calf nicknamed Eclipse is healthy by all accounts and ready to be adopted this week.

Although numerous dolphin facilities throughout Florida have expressed interest in taking the calf, whose mother was one of 31 offshore bottlenose dolphins believed to have died in January at Layton, Mase and a panel of biologists and researchers have reduced the list to three candidates: Dolphin Research Center in Greedy Key, The Sea in Islamorada, and Dolphins Plus in Key Largo.

A marine facility in the Florida Panhandle also is among the front-runners to adopt the dolphin, but Mase insists a Keys home for Eclipse is the ideal situation. The calf would not be subjected to a long, stressful transport, and it would remain close to where it was found.

Several experts, including Mase and Craig Polton, executive director of Marine Animal Rescue Society, visited several dolphin facilities in the Keys last week to determine the best home for Eclipse. After biologists and researchers determined last week that the dolphin should not be released into the wild, a search has been under way for a marine facility that will meet his many needs.

Marine experts say Eclipse needs to be with other dolphins, in particular females and perhaps a mother that is lactating. Not only are male dolphins less aggressive for the calf, but the dolphin still is bottle-fed and needs to learn socialization skills from a mother figure. The Dolphin Connection at Hawk's Cay Resort in Duck Key was ruled out as a possible candidate because it is home to only male dolphins.

Since being rescued Jan. 19, the calf has been housed at the Florida Marine Research Institute on Long Key, the site of last month's massive stranding of more than 300 dolphins. Polton, who has been instrumental in the calf's rehabilitation, said the dolphin has gained almost 40 pounds over the last 2 1/2 weeks, growing several centimeters in girth and developed swimming muscles, signifying that it may live a longer life than initially believed.

Nevertheless, Mase is quick to note that whichever facility is awarded the calf needs to be aware of the inherent risks involved. Although numerous vital tests on the calf proved negative, the cause of its illness — and that of the other 300 or so stranded dolphins — has yet to be determined.

"Whoever takes him knows that they're taking a risk of bringing a possible illness into their dolphin population," Mase said. "Fortunately, that's not our decision to make."

A search has been under way for a marine facility that can care for the young male.

marker 19.5. Don't expect to take home enough trees, shrubs and ground coverings to complete your entire yard, however.

Chris Bergh, South Florida regional land steward for the conservancy, said residents will be limited to three plants per household to ensure there's enough for everyone. Last year, nearly 3,800 people took home free foliage. While most native vegetation isn't as attractive as many store-bought plants, Bergh insists there is good reason to participate.

"Not only do native plants provide a habitat and food for native birds and animals, they are, in my opinion, very beautiful," said Bergh, adding that the average three-gallon native plant this weekend would be \$20 if bought at a store.

"Here, some of them don't have big, showy blossoms, but many have flowers with plenty of color... We've obviously made a big investment in this because we truly believe that it's very good for the natural environment and wildlife. Everything else is secondary."

In addition to the plant giveaway, community groups will offer educational booths and presentations on successful planting of natives, planting for birds and creating butterfly gardens.

The Monroe County Cooperative Extension Service will supply gardeners with personalized advice on the proper choice and placement of native plants.

Bergh said Saturday's plants were purchased with the help of donations from local businesses in an effort to accommodate the expected large crowd; residents will be given numbers in a first-come, first-served basis.

Bergh recommends that residents come with ideas of where they want to plant — for instance, by a canal or under a porch — so experts can help them assess the environment and choose the appropriate plants.

Nature giveaway to boost Keys' native plants

Not only do native plants provide a habitat and food for native birds and animals, they are, in my opinion, very beautiful.

KEYS BUSINESS

City Electric new force in crime war

City Electric System and Monroe County Crime Stoppers are working together to encourage residents who may have information about crimes to share.

Rewards may be given for tips that lead to arrests.

"City Electric is pleased to take an active role in a program that helps make our community a safer place to live," said Stan Kead, City Electric manager and a member of the Crime Stoppers board of directors.

The utility's employees recently hung brightly yellow Crime Stoppers signs on 37 poles throughout Key West offering rewards for reporting crimes on the Crime Stoppers hot line. Employees near will hang signs on Stock Island and Big Pine Key.

To date, tips to Monroe County Crime Stoppers have resulted in the closing of 121 criminal cases, 123 arrests and the recovery/seizure of illegal drugs, stolen property and cash worth more than \$11,000.

Tips may remain anonymous and may receive a reward of up to \$1,000 for information leading to an arrest.

The number for Crime Stoppers is 800-ME-TIPS.

March 31 is the deadline for senior citizens 60 and older and permanently disabled veterans to apply to the Florida Keys Apartment Authority for discounts on their water bills.

For household annual incomes must not exceed \$16,476 for this discount, which is 20 percent. No minimum monthly fee is charged.

Applicants must apply in person at the authority's office at 1800 Kennedy Dr. or at branch offices at mile marker 81.5 in Tavernier and 3375 Overseas Highway in Marathon.

If an applicant is physically unable to appear, an authority representative will visit the home to complete filing procedures.

Monroe County's Emergency Food and Shelter Board has been awarded more than \$1,000 in federal funds to supplement the emergency food and shelter programs operating in the Florida Keys.

Board Chairman Ron Heron is urging nonprofit agencies providing food or shelter assistance to those residents to attend the next board meeting if they are interested in applying for part or all of the available funding.

The meeting will be at 9 a.m. Thursday at the Salvation Army office, 3190 Flagler Ave., Key West.

For further information, call Heron at 305-294-0022.

The Key Largo Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center had 11,275 visitors in January, an increase of 4.4% over December and 2,039 more than January 1999.

Domestic visitors last month made up 27.2 percent of the total; 33 percent were foreign.

Every seat in the union was represented (seven Hawaii with 100+ people) and visitors from 38 foreign countries checked in. Fifty-three per cent of the visitors arrived without prior reservations; 21 percent stayed in Key West, with 52.7 percent going to other parts of the island.

Business news appears each Tuesday in The Miami Herald. To report business news of interest to the Keys, send information to Crime Stoppers, The Herald, 439 Eaton St., Key West Fla. 33640. The fax number is 305-294-5176.

STATE EDITOR: JAY DUCASSI |ducassi@herald.com 1-800-HERALD-5 ext.3557