

Responding to Dolphin Incidents in the Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary

The Department for Environment and Water (DEW) is the SA Government agency responsible for the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*, under which marine mammals are protected, and the *Animal Welfare Act 1985*, under which animal welfare is managed.

Under this legislation, the 'Marine Mammal Intervention Policy' and 'Procedure' guides when and how the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) may intervene in a dolphin health or injury incident. Recognising the importance of allowing wild animals to remain wild, the policy and procedure requires that:

- NPWS will only intervene where absolutely necessary and where the intervention is considered to be of clear benefit to the health of the animal;
- in most cases, and especially in response to naturally occurring dolphin illnesses and injuries, the preferred response is to allow nature to take its course.

When does the government intervene to help sick and injured dolphins?

Over the years, dolphins have been observed and photographed showing signs of both natural illnesses and injuries, and human-induced injuries. In deciding whether to intervene, the NPWS follows these steps:

- gather as much information as possible about the animal and the health issue. Very often, this information is provided by the many community volunteers who observe the dolphins regularly, as well as Rangers conducting further observations;
- consider whether the illness or injury is natural, or caused by human activities;
- seek advice from the Dolphin Expert Reference Group, made up of independent, qualified vets and experts with experience in marine mammals;
- consider the animal's welfare and whether intervention is in its best interests;

- consider whether intervention is logistically feasible and safe for Rangers and others involved.



Dolphin calf with a life threatening entanglement in fishing gear, 2019. Photo S. Sharp

Planning a response

Once a decision has been made to intervene and assist a dolphin, an operational plan is developed.

Operations to capture and disentangle a dolphin are logistically complex and require people with a broad range of skills. There are considerable safety risks, both for the dolphin and for the people involved.

These risks and other factors are carefully considered, including:

- the likelihood of being able to find the dolphin on the day of the operation;
- whether the dolphin typically resides in shallow water, or deeper areas of the Sanctuary (the dolphin must be netted in water less than 1.5m deep for the safety of the in-water team);
- weather and tide forecasts for the day of the operation;
- availability of key personnel on the selected day of the operation. The NPWS may seek assistance from SAPOL Water Operations, Fisheries Officers, Marine Safety Officers, wildlife rescue volunteers such as AMWRRO, a professional net fisherman, a qualified veterinarian, volunteers to help find the dolphin and additional NPWS Rangers.

What does a response look like?

The following steps are based on a recent example of an operation to disentangle a dolphin, undertaken in June 2021:

- The Incident Controller conducts a briefing at the boat ramp for all personnel, to ensure everybody clearly understands the operational plan.
- Finding the dolphin – volunteers look for the dolphin from key land-based viewing sites, while Rangers and Fisheries Officers search from boats.
- Once the dolphin is located, visual contact is maintained from a boat. The net boat then approaches, following the dolphin until it enters a shallow area less than 1.5m deep. In-water crew, including the vet, follow in another boat, ready to enter the water when directed by the Incident Controller.
- Other vessels and water users are kept well clear of the netting operation by Fisheries or Marine Safety Officers.
- The net is deployed around the dolphin and slowly drawn in. Once the dolphin is entrapped within the net, the in-water crew enter the water. Their role is to support the dolphin at the surface, enabling it to breathe easily. They hold the tail securely above the water, to ensure the dolphin is constrained.



Dolphin secured and supported by 3 rangers, with vet removing entanglement and assessing health.

Can medications such as antibiotics be administered to wildlife?

Some community members have suggested that DEW/NPWS should provide medication, such as antibiotics, to dolphins to assist their recovery from injuries or illnesses.

- The provision of antibiotics to wild animals is not routinely undertaken by DEW. Antibiotics are only effective against bacterial infections, and should be used only when required. Providing antibiotics to a wild animal is not an action that should be taken lightly, particularly as a single dose is likely to prove ineffective and a full course would require capture, confinement of the animal and multiple handling episodes, imposing a significant level of stress on a wild animal.
- The use of antibiotics in wildlife species requires judicious consideration and clear clinical evidence to support application. Whilst antibiotics may be prescribed commonly for humans and companion animals, to do so for wild animals without a clear diagnosis of a bacterial infection, coupled with the stress of multiple handling events and prolonged confinement, would be contrary to best practice and the animal's best interests.
- When managing wildlife species under the National Parks and Wildlife Act and the Animal Welfare Act, with associated policies and procedures, DEW endeavours to act always in the best interests of our wildlife. A core principle includes ensuring that wild animals remain wild, and are not dependent on human support and regular intervention for survival. This is critical to ensuring the long term sustainability of wildlife populations for future generations.

Community members can report marine mammal incidents to a NPWS duty officer on 0427 556 676.

For more information visit

www.parks.sa.gov.au/parks/adelaide-dolphin-sanctuary

