

The History of Whale and Dolphin Rescue in the UK

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Forenote: At the September 2000 meeting of the Marine Animal Rescue Coalition (MARC), I agreed to produce a review of the history of the Coalition. This document is the result and my thanks to those who commented on an earlier draft.

This history is generated from my own perspective and in no way is meant to imply that any one part of the Coalition is more or less valuable than any other.

From the perspective of the dolphin stranded on a British shore, and therefore likely to die, the only important questions are how well-trained and how well equipped is the rescue team that will come to help me and how quickly will they get here?

1. Background.

This review charts the emergence of a new movement in animal welfare in the UK: A collaboration focused on the difficult (and often heart-breaking) issue of the rescue of stranded whales and dolphins and one that now involves hundreds of people directly (i.e. as trained rescuers) and many thousands more indirectly. The success of this collaboration has come about because of the interest and hard work of a team of people who work both through the Coalition and their own organisations. This text recognises by name some of the main contributors linked to the main developments in this rescue effort in UK but, of necessity, not all of them.

2. The Early Days.

The first example of a UK-wide co-ordinated effort to help marine wildlife through the collaboration of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is generally acknowledged as the 1988 seal epizootic. As large numbers of common seals started dying around the North Sea region, Greenpeace and the RSPCA jointly established what became known as The Seal Assessment Unit in Docking, in Norfolk. Teams from other organisations and numerous volunteers joined in with the efforts at Docking to help the large numbers of stricken seals. The volunteers included representatives from dive organisations who found that their aquatic skills, excellent teamwork and water craft could be put to good purpose. Many of the individuals involved in these efforts remained in contact after the event and their enthusiasm and interest in further rescue work created an initiative that

eventually led to the British Divers Stranding Meeting in October 1993, hosted by the University of Greenwich. Various groups and individuals had realised the need for better co-ordination, cooperation and resource sharing when dealing with stricken marine mammals.

Prior to 1988, several organisations and individuals had been striving to help stranded cetaceans more or less independently. For example, the RSPCA produced the first edition of *First Aid for Stranded Cetaceans* in 1982. Ten years later, in 1992, they convened a meeting of experts to review and improve the original text (an initiative coordinated by RSPCA Wildlife Officer, Helen McLachlan). They also concluded that a supplementary text specifically for vets should be produced.

The second meeting of the nascent coalition (this time called the Marine Mammal Rescue/British Divers Stranding Meeting), again held at the University of Greenwich, was chaired jointly by myself and Alan Knight, in February 1994. The record of the meeting reports after lunch, Alan Knight formally proposed the setting up of a UK strandings network and notes that Mark Simmonds was asked to lead this initiative. At the third meeting, in August of the same year, the participants agreed a mission statement the main objective of the group, presently known as the Strandings Network, is to facilitate the rescue of marine wildlife and that the principal, but not necessarily exclusive, focus of the group was cetaceans.

Although the acronym MARC (Marine Animal Rescue Coalition) was not adopted until the autumn meeting in 1994, I would suggest that for the purpose of defining the origin of the Coalition, we identify the October 1993 meeting, which provided its ideological focus and impetus. (This event was also the first serious outreach to the numerous interested groups and individuals to form a viable coalition.) So — at this point of review - the Coalition has been in existence for eight years.

The early focus of coalition work was capacity building, with an emphasis on bringing into the coalition all the individuals and organisations involved in cetacean rescue across the UK. We were also very concerned that some stranded animals were being treated inappropriately, and therefore cruelly, due to a lack of understanding by their would-be rescuers. One of our earliest initiatives was described in the minutes of the August 1994 meeting as the Stopping Amateur Refloats Poster Campaign !

Work towards the improvement of cetacean rescue begins to take two complementary routes dating from about this time. The MARC forum focused on technical development and, simultaneously, the divers and other rescue groups focused on developing teams of appropriately trained rescuers to use the

approaches defined through the work of the Coalition. The rescue groups also worked hard to increase the numbers of trained rescuers around the UK.

The priorities of the MARC meetings have evolved since its earliest days but the key themes and working practices have remained a constant feature. The February 1994 meeting, for example, considered reports from a number of working groups (the primary method by which the Coalition has continued to progress its objectives) focusing on Equipment, Training, Public Awareness and Networking. The building of public awareness and networking in the first few years of Coalition work included consideration of the creation of a separate over-arching charity that would hold, as one of its primary functions, a central rescue fund. This option was sometimes linked to discussions about the establishment of a permanent rescue facility.

It was also decided very early on, that MARC itself should not be an organization in its own right principally to avoid the danger that it would compete for funds with the rescue organisations themselves. Maintaining its status as a simple forum was, I think wise, but I will return to the issue of the need for a central emergency fund later in this review.

3. Highlights from the History of MARC

3.1 Pontoons and other Equipment.

One of the most valuable contributions that the Coalition has made to marine animal rescue in the UK has been its role in the identification, acquisition and development of rescue equipment.

For a number of years, WDCS had funded Project Jonah (PJ), in New Zealand, supporting its rescue work there and it was probably Alison Smith, of WDCS, who first realised that the pontoons and methods used by PJ would be of benefit elsewhere in the world, including the UK.

However, pontoons did not come cheap. In my records, a letter dated January 1995 from Alison notes that a single set of rescue pontoons would cost 5,800 New Zealand dollars (about £1,800) and not including freight to the UK.. Project Jonah was also concerned that any pontoons coming to the UK must be used appropriately and, in June 1995, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with WDCS to try to ensure this.

Alison was also keen to import the PJ rescue philosophy and had herself recently undertaken one of their training courses in New Zealand. The fact that PJ had already worked on strandings for some twenty years proved invaluable to efforts elsewhere in the world.

Thus, in November 1995, WDCS was pleased to sponsor a visit to the UK by Project Jonah's Tanya Jones. She brought with her a set of rescue pontoons to use in three training events; at Dursledon Point in Dorset, the new RSPCA animal hospital in East Winch, Norfolk (built partly to replace Docking), and an SSPCA co-ordinated gathering in the Moray Firth.

I should also note that Andy Williams also took a very serious look at rescue action on the shore and the PJ approach in these early days. (His considerations on this being submitted in partial fulfillment of his degree in education.)

By July 1997, we were in negotiations with Project Jonah to have the pontoons manufactured more cost-effectively here in the UK. Alan Knight eventually clinched this deal and, from then on, BDMLR (in consultation with the Coalition) has co-ordinated their production, dissemination and maintenance. A year later, nine new sets of pontoons were in play in the UK, their production funded by a number of sponsors. This brought the total number in Britain to 15.

MARC has continually reviewed its equipment needs and, by January 1995, Andy Williams had helped us to identify comprehensive lists at the now familiar levels 1, 2 and 3 — meaning local, regional, and national requirements. James Barnett (then with the Seal Sanctuary in Cornwall) made the first comprehensive UK-wide inventory of equipment in 1998.

3.2 At the Beachhead.

Many early meetings focused on the co-ordination of the rescue teams on the shore, including defining the need for a team leader, PR person and so forth. Again the Coalition's adopted practice benefited from the New Zealand experience of Project Jonah. Much of the Project Jonah approach continues to be reflected in UK training initiatives — including, for example, the first BDMLR Marine Mammal Medic course (advertised in the first edition of BDMLR's Marine Life Rescue published in summer 1998).

Southern Marine Life Rescue (SMLR) had run 4 volunteer training courses by January 1994 (thanks to the hard work of Andy Williams, Carl Morgan, James Barnett and Paul Jepson), thereby helping to set the trend for much that was to follow. The SMLR Training Strategy included a set of course syllabuses for 3 separate courses (levels 1-3) and a training pack.

In parallel with the development of trained rescue volunteers, the coalition has facilitated the development of appropriate skills by several veterinary experts who now form a group that underpins the work of the Coalition. These are also the same people who often have to take very difficult decisions on the shore.

Paul Jepson (the UK's strandings co-ordinator) developed the first formal Criteria for the Assessment of Stranded Cetaceans for the Coalition in January 1995 and, at about the same time, SMLR produced notes to aid cetacean assessment, drafted by Andy Williams and James Barnett.

The key vets (i.e. those that are usually accessible night and day and who know enough about the special biology of cetaceans to also aid other vets in the field) are Paul Jepson, James Barnett, Tony Patterson and Ian Robinson. There are also others, somewhat more on the periphery, but who have continued to input advice and various other kinds of important support to cetacean rescue over the years, most notably John Baker, Martin Cooke and Sue Mayer.

The need to ensure a rapid summoning of appropriate expertise to stranded animals has also been a continuing theme of our efforts. In this respect, the production and dissemination of the MARC posters (there have been two versions to date both featuring cetaceans and seals and with sponsorship from the Environment Agency), can be seen as one of our major successes.

3.3 Reports provided to the Coalition

The work of the Coalition has been underpinned by the flow of papers that it receives. For example, at each full Coalition meeting there is typically a review of the reports of rescues undertaken, and this has undoubtedly been an important learning exercise.

Many other types of documents have also been considered. Whilst there are too many to list, some stand out. For example, in the early days, the Coalition received and considered painstaking reviews of the distribution of strandings provided by Alan and Mary Stuart, the Rescue of a Grey Seal from Dungeness B Power Station (from Mark Stevens in 1997), and, in the same year, Paula Tiller's review of mass strandings. I note also Earthkind's report on seal entanglement. However, probably the most influential of all these documents was the paper still known as The Mayer Report.

Sue Mayer, a vet who had previously been the director of the Seal Assessment Unit at Docketing, was commissioned by WDCS to undertake a critical review of rescue methods. This extensive document was considered by MARC and its recommendations broadly endorsed at the meeting in April 1996. This established the basic working parameters used by MARC affiliates. (Affiliates seems the best term to use in this context, as MARC does not have a membership).

I might also mention the RSPCA's handbook, published in 1997, Stranded Cetaceans: guidelines for veterinary surgeons and, of course, the two

editions of the BDMLR training manual, the latest of which was issued this year with a forward by Will Travers and Virginia McKenna (of the Born Free Foundation). Another significant report was the review made by James, Andy and Alison of the rehabilitation facility in Haarderwijk.

As noted earlier, rescue training exercises for lay people have been running since at least 1993 and have been refined over the years. In 1997, the Coalition produced an outline of what a training workshop might include, based to a large extent on the Mayer Report, the experience of Project Jonah and the practical experience of others, including Rob Macklin and Rod Penrose (who had recently run a rescue training workshop in Wales). However, the MARC affiliates have not concluded a single national MARC training course for everyone and this initiative has instead been taken forward by individual organisations.

Training specifically for vets was first organised by SMLR in Dorset in 1993 and Rod Penrose and Rob Macklin in Wales in 1995. Veterinary training has been strongly linked to the criteria used for assessment of stranded cetaceans, recently culminating in the production of a triage (veterinary guide to assessment) and vet websites (provided by WDCS/BDMLR) which cover seals, as well as cetaceans, and gives information on first aid, therapeutics and assessment. There are also veterinary sections in the new BDMLR manual on seals and cetaceans. The latest veterinary course was run by BDMLR at the RVC in March last year.

4. MARC basic working parameters.

The April 1996 meeting concluded that MARC activities should focus on rescue on the shore and not captive rehabilitation. At the same time, picking up on another Mayer recommendation, we concluded that neonates (mother-dependent calves) should not be rescued, unless their mother could be found — in which case every effort would be made to reunite mother and calf.

In December 1999, the small group of experts that are sometimes known as the MARC vets and the Chair met to make another formal review of the options for stranded cetaceans and the criteria used for their clinical assessment. This meeting was able to benefit from the data and experiences gathered in the intervening years. We prepared a report for the next MARC meeting, including the following conclusions:

- The standard of clinical assessment [of cetaceans on the shore] has continued to improve;
- Post-mortems confirmed that a significant number of individuals of offshore (i.e. pelagic) species strand in a comparatively healthy state — although there was some evidence of animals

- that had been refloated (i.e. returned to the sea) which then re-stranded again;
- Capture myopathy (i.e. severe muscle damage caused by stress and exertion) associated with stranding was identified as a new concern, especially as it may be undetectable during clinical assessment;
 - the longer a cetacean remains on the shore, the more likely it is that deterioration will occur in the animal's condition due to the stranding event itself;
 - It would be inappropriate for the Coalition to start adopting the option of [captive] rehabilitation in the UK because:
 - i. lack of evidence that the present policy of refloating is not working;
 - ii. the improvement in clinical assessment therefore decision making on the beach that has occurred in the UK over the last few years and the potential to further improve on this;
 - iii. the poor success rate in the US (and the UK) of rehabilitation;
 - iv. the lack of suitable facilities in the UK where rehabilitation might occur; and
 - v. the possible inability to provide optimal conditions for survival in captivity without producing an animal that is inappropriate for release.

The vets' review also urged that an improved programme of post-release monitoring of refloated animals should be initiated (alongside a review of procedures used for rehabilitation in the US). Such a programme was felt essential to ensure that animals were surviving.

The MARC meeting endorsed all these conclusions and recommendations. The correlation between length of time on the shore and deterioration in condition confirmed one of our basic working premises — get there as fast as possible! (I note that another reason for MARC believing swiftness of response to be key was that this also helps to stop others — albeit often well-meaning- intervening inappropriately.)

Another product from the vets' review was a letter from all the MARC vets published in the Veterinary Record. This advertised the work of the Coalition and directed other vets to the triage mentioned above and the new veterinary website. James Barnett led the development of this website, which is intended to help vets assess stranded cetaceans and seals.

Tagging of refloated animals is now accepted as an urgent priority. Whilst it has actually been on our agenda since the second meeting, I do not think that

what might be seen as slow progress on this issue represents a mistake. Tagging methods remain controversial and it has become apparent that little attention has been paid to the effects on cetaceans of being tagged, including the differing potential for interference with normal biology provided by different tag designs. However, small, hydrodynamic tags are now in the offing. If we can find funds and appropriate technical support to help apply them, it appears that we can now monitor the animals post-refloating with far less potential for a detrimental effect from the tagging itself.

The 2000 MARC meeting considered tagging in some detail, noting some problems that deserve further investigation, such as the significance of drag and methods of attachment.

Over the years, the coalition has also discussed other important issues — such as personal liability and, true to its early nature, it has never entirely limited itself to cetaceans. Seals often creep into discussions (including the contentious issue of hat-tagging), as also do sea birds and most recently turtles. We have also looked at oil spills, based on the recognition that many Coalition affiliates will be likely to be involved in the event of a spill.

When there was a danger of a shortage of Immobilon (the drug used in euthanasia in the UK), the Coalition successfully scrambled to find sources. (I should also note that the Coalition has given considerable consideration to the difficult issue of the application of euthanasia itself over the years).

5. Failures.

Looking back across the years, I detect only one notable failure in the technical efforts of the Coalition and this was the Veterinary Database. WDCS funded Sue Mayer to design data sheets to collect information from stranded animals, including details of the treatments that they received. Sue, aided by a colleague, then went on to develop a database for the storage of these data in 1997. However, the data-sheets proved unpopular. They were so detailed that in the intense atmosphere of a rescue they proved difficult to complete and the database remained empty.

Subsequently, the data sheets have been revised (by James Barnett and Ian Robinson) and can be found in the new BDMLR manual and on the BDMLR website.

As mentioned earlier, we do not have a single MARC-endorsed national training course for rescuers. This might be seen as another failure, unless the training courses provided by individual organisations are adequately filling this gap. This would seem to require further assessment. (For example, at the moment I do not know what training the RSPCA, SSPCA and USPCA provide their officers for dealing with

stranded animals, although I know that many officers from these organisations have availed themselves of the training opportunities provided by MARC organisations.)

More generally, I remain very concerned that there are still fairly frequent reports of people — outside of the Coalition - returning cetaceans to the sea without calling in the experts. This would seem to mean that there is still a need for a significant out-reach to the coastal public and perhaps again to the relevant authorities to remind them about MARC and how to best deal with stricken marine mammals.

6. Conclusions

I believe that this review of MARC shows it to have been largely successful in fulfilling its mission. The Coalition has lasted seven years plus and generated seven fat lever-arch files of correspondence (not including the larger reports) now dominating my office. There is no sign that interest in the Coalition has waned. The April 1996 meeting was attended by 27 people representing 19 organisations (and 11 more sent apologies) and this compares with the September 2000 meeting, in Bath, which hosted 29 people and about 15 organisations (11 sent apologies). The MARC contact list actually has 122 names on it at this time. This is no longer a list of everyone involved in cetacean rescue, but they are all (I think) represented by the organisations and individuals on the MARC contact list.

From (and including) 1994, MARC has held between 2 and 6 meetings per year. One, or more usually two, of these have been full meetings of the coalition. The rest have been either working groups on various themes or regional gatherings designed to help generate or focus interest in particular areas. I count 27 meetings in total.

We are now in a fortunate situation where the UK's DETR-funded strandings project (still co-ordinated by Paul Jepson) has ten years worth of data from which we can learn. These data, for example, confirm that 2/3-3/4 of the stranded pelagic dolphins appeared to be healthy (and died because they stranded). The pathology of stranded and bycaught cetaceans also tells us a lot about the conservation status of the UK's remaining cetaceans. This is all thanks to government funding and the painstaking work of Paul, his predecessor Tjiks Kuiken, Vic Simpson, Rod Penrose and John Baker, in England and Wales, and Harry Ross, Bob Reid and Tony Patterson, in Scotland. It is important for both welfare and conservation reasons that this work is continued and expanded.

Moreover, in the same way that we have been successful in importing rescue technology and approaches from elsewhere in the world (notably New Zealand), so we have now seen our rescue methods and philosophy adopted in Ireland and, most recently

of all this has been process has also been initiated in continental Europe.

Clearly, the existence of a Coalition is not responsible for all the progress made, this is down to individuals and individual organisations but I think, as some (including Alan Knight and I) hoped at the outset, it has facilitated and helped to co-ordinate this progress. Inevitably there remain some difficult issues and tension points and I will close by considering these and making some recommendations:

6.1 Central Emergency Fund

I still do not believe that the UK is ready to deal with a large mass stranding. In particular, I remain very concerned that (as far as I am aware) there is still no central pot of money for an emergency — specifically a mass stranding, although the danger of this situation has been acknowledged several times over the last eight years. I do not now think that a new organisation needs to be formed to hold this fund, just that it needs to be kept somewhere where it can be quickly drawn on, when needed.

6.2 Captive Facilities

My journey through the archives reminded me that discussions relating to developing a facility in Weymouth have been ongoing for many years. However, the strength of the opposing viewpoints on this issue, for example as expressed at the last MARC meeting, may actually threaten the Coalition's future.

I do not believe that MARC supports the development of a stand-alone permanent captive facility for a variety of reasons. However, in the case of Weymouth, we are considering the use of an existing facility, when available, for carrying out short-term rehabilitation. Therefore, I urge that all parties continue to discuss this specific proposal openly (and the rehabilitation issue generally), to seek to make progress cautiously (guided by the welfare needs of the animals) and to try to take all opinions into consideration. For some this may sometimes seem to make progress frustratingly slow but a united Coalition should also remain one of our primary aims.

The issue of beach-head temporary pools also still needs some resolution. It has been considered for a number of years but still requires development.

6.3 Tagging

As discussed earlier, so that we can be fully confident that refloated animals survive, a tagging programme is now needed. MARC has initiated contact with experts in this field in the UK and we will also have to ensure that this aspect of rescue work is properly funded and its results transparent to all.

6.4 Future Development of the Coalition

It is clear that we are also still developing and improving our rescue approaches and that this is best achieved by the polling of expertise, indicating that there would seem to be a continuing need for the forum that the MARC provides

The growing numbers of people involved in cetacean and seal rescue are also likely to be concerned about other developments affecting these animals and, as proposed at the last MARC meeting, I would like the Coalition to give some consideration to whether (and how) it might want to address these matters.

Examples of such issues could include proposals to kill dolphins for research made by neighbouring states and commercial whaling.

One of the things that did become apparent to me in making this review is that, since 1988, something rather profound has actually happened (and I suspect that because I have been close to this initiative that I did not recognise it clearly before making this review):

There is now well-co-ordinated and well-informed rescue of stranded cetaceans in the UK — this is underpinned by a healthy and expert network spanning the UK. Eight years ago, this simply did not exist.

This paper was presented to the 2001 Wildcare Conference: Inverness, 10-11 March 2001.