A turning tide for STRANDED marine mammals

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EDNESDAY, November 4, 11 a.m. A call comes in to the Trinidad and Tobago Marine Mammal Stranding Network (TTMMSN) — a whale has been found stranded on Manzanilla beach.

The TTMMSN team spring into action, leaving its head office at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex to head to the scene of the whale stranding. While en route they get word that the fishermen succeeded in getting the whale about a mile and a half out to sea but a few hours later, it was back on the shore, prompting the team to instruct the fishermen to make further attempts at refloating the whale.

Upon the team's arrival, the TTMMSN finds a male Melon-head whale with a very grim prognosis. The whale was thin and in a generally poor condition, with moist lung sounds and muffled, thready heart sounds, reported veterinarian and TTMMSN's coordinator, Dr Carla Phillips. The whale was in a state of periodic muscle tremors. With their expertise and knowledge, the team deduces that the whale would not survive. They make the decision to euthanise the animal. It's not the way they were hoping this latest stranding incident would end, but they know that further attempt to refloat the animal would have resulted in its drowning. The team's work doesn't end at the beach, in cases where stranded mammals don't survive, it's equally important from a public and animal health safety standpoint to determine the cause of death, so the whale's carcass is taken to The UWI School of Veterinary Medicine, where a necropsy is performed to find out what happened.

The TTMMSN has been in existence for the past 15 years, in that period of time it has responded to around 30 marine mammal strandings, including eight reported strandings for 2015. Many strandings occur along the Manzanilla/Mayaro coast and off La Brea. The network got its start back in 1999 after 21 pilot whales were found stranded in Manzanilla, it was the largest attended to a stranding of a 40-foot Bryde's whale weighing an excess of two tonnes that washed up in La Brea. That incident as well as the one in 1999 brought to the fore a number of challenges facing the network, including logistics, a lack of organisation and difficulty accessing resources, said Dr Rod Suepaul. But over the years, those living in coastal communities have become more familiar with the roles and functions of the network so that whenever there is a stranding, the network is contacted by fishermen, or other groups they partner with and in some cases by the police. There are a number of reasons (infectious and non-infectious) why marine mammals in particular get stranded.

"If an animal that is usually part of a group strands by itself, that animal is most likely ill," said Phillips.

Non-infectious causes would refer to some type of trauma due to boat strikes or injury out at sea which may make it impossible for the animal to keep up with the rest of its group so it ends up washing ashore. Infectious causes could be anthropogenic, it could be caused by some type of human interference like water pollution, or sonar testing which may disorient the animal so that they lose their signals and end up ashore. Entanglement in fishing gear could also be responsible for many strandings, said Phillips.

One's first instinct upon seeing a stranded mammal may be to lead the animal back out to open water but the network strong-
ly cautions against this. First of all, it is illegal to handle any marine mammal, live or dead, for the purpose of keeping, storing or interacting with it, without a permit. Secondly, handling a stranded mammal may do more harm not only to the animal but to yourself and others. Any interaction with the stranded animal must be left up to the experts at TTMMSN and the wildlife unit, adds Phillips.

"The animal may be stranded due to infectious causes, it may have a virus, bacteria or fungus. If that's the case, then some of those organisms can be passed onto man. If you go and expose yourself to that you could be putting yourself in harm's way. Additionally in most cases, people try to take the animal back out to sea by tying a rope to its tail and dragging it out. That's a no-no, you can actually cause significant spinal injury to the animal, you can also damage the part of the animal that is touching the ground," she warned.

Further, if the animal is unable to maintain its equilibrium (balance) in the water, which is probably the reason it washed up on shore in the first place, leading the animal back out to sea can result in its drowning.

Helping people to understand what to do in the event of a stranding is a big part of TTMMSN's work. Since marine mammal strandings are not going to stop, in what ways can the public help?

Firstly, take a note of the time the stranding was spotted and get an exact location. Without touching the animal, try to estimate its length and size, this information would be useful when the network is determining the type of equipment they would need. Contact the TTMMSN as soon as possible, with every stranding incident, time is of the essence. Persons on the scene can determine whether the animal is still alive by looking for eye movements and by observing whether the blowhole is opening and closing, usually a 'pffftt' sound coming from the blowhole would indicate that it is breathing. If an animal is seen rolling around in the surf, persons may be tempted to stop it, however the network requests that they be contacted so that they could guide persons accordingly. It is important that a stranded marine mammal is kept as moist as possible, therefore persons can put towels and cloths over the mammal and throw water over it. Take care not to cover the blowhole— which is like the mammal's nostril as well as the dorsal fin— which serves as its cooling mechanism.

Once the animal is alive, the network's first priority is to get it to refloat, get it back out at sea and give it a chance at survival. As for the latest stranding mentioned at the beginning of the article, which had to be euthanised, the team must set about finding what led to its stranding. Just about all the Melon-head whales that have been stranded over the past five years, including the latest stranding, had the same parasite migrating through its brain.

"If a mammal has a parasite moving through its brain, of course it's going to become disoriented and end up stranded," said Phillips.

For years, both Phillips and Suephol have been lobbying for a rehabilitation centre which will work in collaboration with The UWI School of Veterinary Medicine, where marine animals that are too sick or weak to head back out to sea, can be rehabilitated. In its absence, there are two options — refloatation or euthanasia.

To learn more, the Trinidad and Tobago Marine Mammal Stranding Network can be contacted at the following numbers: 645-3232, ext 4211, 735-3530 or 466-2709.