

Editorial

Plight of marine mammals - does the Internet help or contribute to unnecessary panic?



It would appear that there are significantly more marine mammals stranding or getting themselves into life-threatening situations recently - or are there?

Is climate change causing the entrapment of these animals under shifting ice more today than before? Are entanglements on the rise? These are all valid issues of concern because if they are, then somehow man has not improved anything for these magnificent creatures and even more, has now made things worse.

However there may be one other fact to consider. With today's access to the Internet, every incident that occurs in every corner of the globe can receive worldwide attention at the click of a button. Individuals with their cell phones and digital video cameras can download their pictures and videos to the web and the result is an immediate recount of an event. In the past, it might not have made headline news or the story would have evolved further before getting to the press. These days, news channels regularly search the Internet for newsbytes to serve up to their information hungry followers. This means that there are reports given by news channels which are taken from the Internet directly, with the public assuming it had been researched and verified by their reporters - which is not always the case. As such, rapid release of information could be viewed as a double-edged sword. Faster responses and support can be mustered to a developing crisis. However it could also be that what used to resolve as just a normal natural occurrence gets worldwide attention, even before it has actually become the crisis it is made out to be.

An example of this played out here in Canada not so long ago. It seemed that a number of killer whales were trapped in an inlet by drifting pack ice and a public outcry was immediately raised. "DO

SOMETHING" was the cry across public forums on the Internet. Canadian organizations were bombarded by international emails from a genuinely concerned public. An example of this passion was a telephone call at 0345 in the morning to the emergency number of a Canadian marine mammal organization from a concerned and upset individual in Romania demanding something be done immediately! Finally a few days later, the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans, under whose jurisdiction this sort of problem falls, sent a team to the area to assess the situation. At almost the same time, the winds changed, the ice shifted and the animals were free. So what are we to make of this? Did the public panic unnecessarily, or does our new global information net afford us the ability to have more rapid responses and result in saving more of our aquatic wildlife?

There is no doubt that activist groups and other volunteer organizations have admirably used the Internet to forward their respective causes and for significant fundraising - not necessarily a bad thing. Increasing public awareness, even in people who are not right in the thick of things, is good, if done responsibly. However, therein lies the dilemma - it must be used responsibly by both sides. The public should be aware of the limitations of this information and not accept everything as the crisis it is often portrayed to be. Ultimately having the freedom that currently exists on the Internet to post whatever interests you and to speak one's mind is refreshing, but it also opens up opportunities for misinformation and misunderstandings. It is up to each user to accept the information within the scope of how it is presented and use it responsibly. Perhaps consultations with experts on the implications of the event before news channels air the drama might also help.

One has to think that perhaps as the old saying goes "fore-warned is fore-armed". For the killer whales it was a lucky day when the ice shifted and



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they were freed by nature. However, had the conditions not changed their lives might have been lost. Some might argue it is the way of the wild and that we are being made aware of these types of events today more than we were in the past. Others would suggest it is man's doing that has caused these animals to find themselves in these situations and therefore we must react immediately to help. Is there a right and wrong side, or is there a grain of truth to both? There is no doubt that the Internet is a powerful tool which can result in positive outcomes when used responsibly. Perhaps this responsibility falls to us all, both those providing the information to be as accurate as possible and the consumer to be aware of its' limitations!

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