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Summer Intern Dylan Seidler '20 Treats Seals & Sea Lions at the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, CA



Thanks to a Whitman Internship Grant, I'm spending my summer working for the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, California. Nestled in the hills above the Pacific Ocean, the center is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting ocean conservation through education, scientific research and rehabilitation of sick and injured marine mammals. During my internship, I'll be wearing several hats—working as a member of an animal care crew, shadowing and assisting the veterinary and scientific research staff, and serving as an educational docent.



A typical morning on animal care crew begins around 6:45 a.m. As I enter the fish kitchen, a cacophony of elephant sea noises and sea lion barks, along with the aroma of fresh herring, engulfs me. After morning hellos, fellow crewmembers and I begin preparing breakfast for our patients—elephant seals and sea lion pups. The animals arrive at the center suffering from a variety of ailments including malnutrition, injury from trash entanglements, and shark bites. Older animals are free fed, but for the malnourished pups, we prepare a special fish "milk shake," grinding herring into a blender with salmon oil and water. Our baby elephant seals will often be so underweight that they will need more than 1000 ml of formula, three times a day.

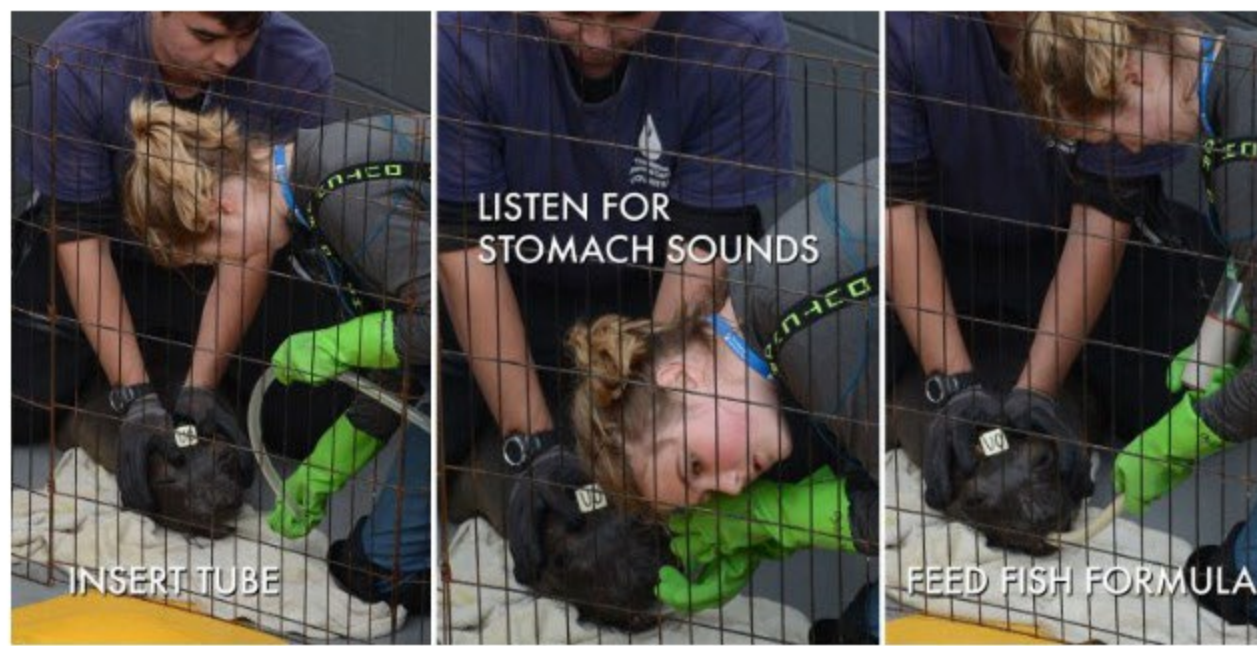
We begin the first feed at 8 a.m. I'm on the team responsible for tube feeding the elephant seal pups. The process requires two people, a restrainer and a tuber. A restrainer will wrap the seal's head in a towel and pin their flippers back, to prevent the person doing the feeding from being bitten. If I'm doing the feed, I take a clear plastic tube and measure it against the animal to assess where the stomach is, then carefully guide the tube into the pup's mouth and down to its stomach. We both listen for stomach sounds to double check that the tube is in the stomach (not in the lungs) before I connect it to a large syringe filled with the fish "milkshake." As I push down on the plunger, the formula enters the seal's stomach. As food reaches their starving bellies, they often close their eyes as a sign of contentment. Once they've reached a healthy weight, the pups will be taught how to eat fish before being released back into the ocean.



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This past week, as part of my work with the veterinary staff, I was able to assist with medical procedures and observe several surgeries. The first patient was Snappie, a feisty young male California sea lion. Like many young pups he was suffering from maternal separation, but also had an injured back flipper. We put him under anesthesia and took radiographs of his back flippers to assess the damage. I was tasked with giving the animal subcutaneous fluids to ensure he remained hydrated during surgery.

The most interesting case of the day was that of Impatience, a young female California sea lion suffering from eye trauma. Her eye had been sutured shut to minimize pain and she was being treated with antibiotics. She was placed under anesthesia so the vet could perform an ultrasound to assess how well the eye was healing. We were pleased to discover that the abscess had shrunk considerably and it was probable she'd regain most of her vision. The eye was healing so well, in fact, that the vet decided to remove the sutures. It was remarkable to see her wake up from anesthesia and open both eyes.

One of the most memorable nonsurgical cases was helping a baby harbor seal, Arroyo, learn how to swim. Harbor seals at center are often less than a week old and Arroyo had been separated from his mother shortly after birth. We placed him in the water and were amazed to see how quickly he learned to swim.



Another role I'll be taking on this summer at the Marine Mammal Center is as a docent. Teaching visitors about ocean conservation and how issues like climate change impact the ecosystem is an important part of the center's mission. It's particularly gratifying to interact with the many children who visit because they're excited to learn, and often ask great questions like, "How do seals drink water?" (Answer: they don't. It comes via the fish they consume). Hopefully, as more people understand and appreciate these creatures of the ocean, they will be inspired to protect it.

