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Critically Ill Sea Lion Gets Second Chance at Life

Collaboration between local marine mammal rescue, stranding network and aquariums help save sea lion.

LAGUNA BEACH, CA Tuesday, November 10, 2020 - Chomper, a 2-year old sea lion rescued by Pacific Marine Mammal Center (PMMC), gets a second chance at life thanks to the collaboration between local aquariums and the marine mammal stranding networks.

Chomper was rescued off a buoy in Newport Beach. She was entangled in fishing line with a hook embedded around her neck. Buoy rescues can not only be challenging because of the elements, but also the unpredictability of these wild animals.

"Let's just say Chomper gave our rescue team a run for their money and earned her name," said Dr. Deming, PMMC's Director of Clinical Medicine.

She arrived at PMMC's animal hospital on July 10th weighing 70 lbs. on intake. Besides her infected entanglement wound, she seemed feisty and was in fairly good body condition. The entanglement was removed, the wound was cleaned and Chomper was put on pain medication and antibiotics. However, after Chomper’s disentanglement surgery she refused to eat fish. This suggested something else was going on with her.

To help determine what was causing Chomper’s anorexia, X-rays were taken and there were two dozen rocks discovered in her stomach. Adult male sea lions, who fast during mating season, have been known to eat rocks. This can help these animals “feel full”, so they can focus on other things besides food, according to Dr. Deming. Younger starving pups and juvenile sea lions are also known to ingest rocks on occasion. In these cases, it is thought that they will ingest rocks when they are compromised and having trouble catching fish. The weight of the rocks in their stomach may help relieve the discomfort of feeling hungry. However, in the long term, ingesting rocks can result in severe weight loss if they are not vomited up and the sea lion doesn’t start successfully foraging for appropriate food.

Prior to her rescue, the pain associated with Chomper's infected fishing line entanglement may have impacted Chomper’s ability to catch fish, so she may have ingested these rocks out of desperation because she was hungry.

Nutritional support was provided via tube feedings over the next month but she would need to start eating fish to be able to meet her daily caloric requirements. Often times sea lions will vomit up rocks on their own once they start eating fish again but Chomper was proving to be a challenging case once again. Various medications were given to stimulate her appetite but none were effective in getting her to start eating on her own. After over 1 month of not eating and progressive weight loss, it was decided that a surgical procedure was needed to remove the rocks in order for her to have a chance at a full recovery.

Invasive abdominal surgery in sea lions is not very safe because of their propensity for their incision sites to open up and/or get infected because of the way they drag their abdomen on the ground when walking. The best and safest option to remove the rocks was via endoscopy- a procedure where a camera is passed from the mouth into the stomach and tools are used to grab the rock so they can be pulled out of the stomach through the mouth. At the time, PMMC did not have an endoscope, so veterinary colleagues, Dr. Lance Adams and Dr. Brittany Stevens, at the Aquarium of the Pacific were
called upon to see if they could help. On July 28th, they happily came over with their endoscope and 12 large rocks were successfully removed from Chomper’s stomach while she was under general anesthesia.

Over the next week, the Animal Care Team would find rocks wrapped in her blankets that she vomited overnight. She literally met the PMMC animal care team halfway - with them removing 12 rocks and her vomiting 12 rocks on her own.

Chomper had a dramatic weight loss of almost 20 lbs. in her 3.5 weeks of not eating at PMMC. Then on the morning of August 3rd, Chomper finally ate her first fish on her own.

"We didn't realize what happened at first," describes Michele Hunter, Director of Animal Care at PMMC. "Her pen mate flung a fish her way and we all froze as she began sniffing the fish. She hadn't shown any interest in nearly a month! As soon as she picked up the fish our team was so ecstatic! We quickly put together a bowl for her and after that there was no stopping her."

Over the next couple months, Chomper gained over 45 lbs and was successfully released back to the wild on November 6th.

Since Chomper’s procedure, the City of Laguna Beach donated the funds needed to buy a refurbished endoscopy unit for the patients at the Pacific Marine Mammal Center, and it’s already being put to good use.

"We now have a very young sea lion pup that had over 40 rocks in his stomach, and we have successfully removed 33 so far and he’s been doing great," said Dr. Deming. "We will also be able to use this endoscopy unit to remove hooks, fishing line and trash from the stomachs of our patients in the future."

This case highlights the value of collaboration within the community and between local aquariums and the marine mammal stranding networks. In wildlife rehabilitation resources can be limited but through collaboration and support from the community, patients are able to receive a high level of care needed to make it back to their ocean home.

Chomper's endoscopic procedure. Chomper eating fish for the first time.
Chompers ready for release.

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**About (Pacific Marine Mammal Center)**

The Pacific Marine Mammal Center rescues, rehabilitates and releases marine mammals and inspires ocean stewardship through research, education and collaboration. PMMC is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization. Our Tax-ID number is: 95-3680896

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