

Marine Mammal Rescue Volunteer

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What do you do?

I volunteer for the Marine Mammal Center. The hospital is located in Sausalito, California but volunteers work up and down the California coast.

I respond to marine mammal distress calls. These may be sick or injured otters, pups separated from their mothers or healthy animals that have been spotted in an unusual place.

If the animal is in need of help, my colleagues and I contact the veterinarians who instruct us about what action to take. We can capture the animal and begin treatment while that otter is being transported to the otter specialists at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. If we rescue a seal, sea lion, cetacean or sea turtle, we take them to the Marine Mammal Center hospital in Sausalito, California.

During the capture, we wear gloves and use a net to safely get the animal. We keep our voices low to avoid startling or stressing the animal. We put the animal on a plastic rack to keep the otter's fur clean. Otters can become too hot or too cold if their fur is comprised by oil, sand, dirt, etc. We monitor the otter's temperature and adjust the surroundings to keep the animal at the correct temperature. We give the otter a dog toy to hold to keep it occupied and calm during transport.

What education and skills do you need?

While I have a law degree, it is not necessary to have a degree to volunteer for marine mammal rescue. You must be at least 18 years old and go through mandatory training for the organization. The training involves animal husbandry, animal capture techniques, safety training, and continuing education about marine mammals and sea turtles.

You must learn to identify the species of marine mammal, know what its physical characteristics are, how it behaves, what it needs to be healthy in terms of food, water, surrounding temperature.

Curriculum areas needed for your job?

Mathematics: Math is used to determine weight of animals, to convert pounds to kilograms. Most of us think in pounds when estimating the weight of an animal as we generally use pounds in our every day life. But veterinarians use kilograms as a standard for determining food, medications, etc. Mathematics is also used in determining medication dosages.

Good Handwriting: Every animal has a medical chart. You must be accurate and have legible writing to ensure that the animal's treatment records are correct. The animal's weight, rescue circumstances, physical condition and medications given must all be recorded completely.

Public Speaking: In our education program, we use public speaking to explain to school classes and community groups our organization's activities and mission. The Marine Mammal Center's mission is to rescue marine mammals, restore them to health, rehabilitate them for release into the ocean and do research into what makes them sick, how to treat and keep them healthy. Most people find our jobs interesting and support our work, but there are some people who question why we do this work. We try to answer all questions accurately and objectively.

Good Physical Condition: An important element in the volunteer's life is physical health. Climbing around on rocks, walking long stretches of beach, netting a wild animal, getting the animal into a carrier and carrying and lifting animals takes strength and stamina.

Key work experiences?

Coordinating a rescue is a unique managerial job. Past stage-management experiences in theatre and television have helped me learn how to figure out how to get all the required elements together. Many of our volunteers who are great at coordinating these rescues have management experience. However, you also need to be good at being part of a team effort. It takes every volunteer working together to make the rescue happen.

Personal skills needed for your job?

Observation skills are important. You have to listen to the animal, watch what they are doing, how they breathing, moving and vocalizing. You look for wounds or entanglements of fishing line, nets, plastics or rope. There is no need to capture a healthy animal that is not in distress unless it is in a dangerous place, such as on a highway or an airport runway!

Problem solving skills are vital to the rescue job. Every rescue is different. An animal may be on a flat sandy beach and be able to move back into the water before you can reach them. The animal may be down a cliff or on some wet slippery rocks. You have to be able to figure out how to capture the animal without danger to the animal or the rescuers. Analytical thinking is key to a safe, efficient and stress-free rescue.

Learning to work together with other people as a part of a team is very important for this job. You rely on your team members to watch your back and keep you from getting bitten or charged by an angry injured wild animal.

What's the best part of your job? What do you enjoy the most about your job?

The best part of the job is watching an animal be released into the wild. When an otter has been picked up sick or injured and you have been a part of that animal's recuperation, you feel so joyful watching that animal come out of its carrier and dive back into the ocean when it is released. We watch the animal swimming out over the waves until we cannot see it anymore.

I also enjoy talking to kids about what we do. They are so interested in marine mammals and surprise me with how much they know about them! They are eager to help out by picking up their trash and being careful about what goes into the ocean.

What do you like least about your job?

The part of my job I like the least is seeing what people do to these beautiful animals by their direct and indirect actions. I see animals that with gunshots, entangled in fishing line and netting, with packing straps around their head, having seizures, even one animal with a crossbow arrow in its neck. I cannot understand why someone would hurt these beautiful animals. By the way, the animal with the arrow was treated and successfully returned to the ocean!

It is important that you protect these animals in some simple ways. Do not throw your trash onto the beach. Pick it up and dispose of it properly. Sea turtles like to eat jellyfish. They can mistake a plastic bag or balloon for food and it can obstruct their systems. Otters, seals and sea lions can get plastic straps

and lines around their heads and flippers. Sea birds eat indigestible trash that can accumulate in their stomachs.

You can also be careful about what goes out in the watershed. Anything you pour down your drain and down the rain gutter will end up in the watershed and ultimately the ocean where these animals live.

How did you decide to work with sea otters?

I wanted to do something to help ocean animals that live right off the coast where I live. A friend was telling me about her adventures as a rescue volunteer and I decided to take the classes. I was hooked! Each month we have more classes and you learn so much about the animals and their habitat. It is a joy to be involved in taking care of these animals.

Why is your job important?

The Southern Sea otter is a vital keystone species and they are in trouble. We need to pay attention to what the otters and other marine mammals are telling us about the health of the ocean and the earth. I am a tiny part of a wonderful group of committed people who are trying to save these animals and make their environment healthier for them and for us.

Do you have any favorite web links to visit to learn more?

Marine science careers:

<http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/learning/education/careers/careers.asp>

Photos of the otter pup named "Repo":

<http://web.mit.edu/pshuang/Public/TMMC/Repo.jpg>

http://web.mit.edu/pshuang/Public/TMMC/Repo_www.jpg

Otter information:

<http://www.werc.usgs.gov/otters/>

Current patients at the Marine Mammal Center:

http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/what_we_do/rehab/patient_report.asp

National Marine Mammal Laboratories

<http://nmml.afsc.noaa.gov/WhatsNew/news.htm>

Great links to California coastal marine organizations

<http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/learning/links/links.asp>