

Arts and Leisure: 'Katrina Dolphins' chronicles an unusual rescue effort

by John Wilkens

Georgeanne Irvine knows a good animal story when she hears one.

She's worked at the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park for 30 years, mostly in public relations, and she's written more than 20 children's books - "Bo the Orangutan," "Elmer the Elephant," "Zelda the Zebra" - on the side.

THE POD SQUAD - Georgeanne Irvine's coffee-table book is about an effort to find a group of dolphins set adrift by Hurricane Katrina. It also carries a universal message: 'It is a story of hope and miracles.' CNS Photo by Nelvin C. Cepeda. So when she learned about a group of dolphins that were swept out to sea from their Mississippi marine park by Hurricane Katrina, recaptured about two weeks later by their trainers, and then relocated to a resort in the Bahamas, she recognized the potential for a page turner.

Even if she knew very little about dolphins. And even less about hurricanes.

"I think it's the animal story of the decade," she said.

Irvine tells the saga in a new coffee-table book, "The Katrina Dolphins: One-Way Ticket to Paradise." Published in November, the 170-page book explores how the dolphins became a symbol of hope amid one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history.

Katrina hit in late August 2005, devastating not just New Orleans - which received most of the attention from the public and the media - but also the coast of Mississippi.

"It looked like someone had taken a knife and scraped everything off the Earth," said Irvine, who visited the region twice while researching the book.

When the storm approached, workers at the Marine Life Oceanarium, a 50-year-old tourist attraction in Gulfport, Miss., evacuated as many of the animals as they could.

The exotic birds and some of the sea lions were trucked to trainers' homes inland. Six dolphins were moved about five miles from the coast to the swimming pools at two motels.

Eight dolphins - Jackie, Elijah, Kelly, Noah, Michelle, Toni, Tamra and Jill - were moved into the park's 20-foot-tall main tank and left there to ride out Katrina.

After the storm, workers picked their way through the twisted wreckage and found the main tank drained of all but about 5 feet of foul water. Fearing the worst, one of the trainers dived into the muck to search for carcasses. The dolphins were gone.

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| table border="0" cellpadding="10" cellspacing="0" align="right"> | The trainers hoped the dolphins had been washed into the gulf by the storm surge, but they had no way to search for them. All the helicopters were being used to rescue people, and most of the boats had been destroyed. |
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Twelve days later, they finally got on a helicopter. Irvine interviewed the pilot, who told her he thought the searchers were nuts. She quoted him saying, "How are you going to find dolphins in the gulf?"

They flew over the rubble of the oceanarium and headed toward open water. Almost immediately, they spotted all eight dolphins - alive, and together. It was as if the animals, raised in captivity, were waiting for the trainers to come along and toss them fish.

"It really was a miracle, a bright spot in a dismal situation," Irvine said.

One by one the dolphins were captured. They went into temporary tanks set up in a warehouse in Gulfport by the Navy's Marine Mammal Program. The program trains dolphins and sea lions to locate and mark explosive mines.

Eventually, 17 Marine Life dolphins - the eight recaptured in the gulf, the six from the motel pools, and three that had been on loan to other parks - were sold to a resort, Atlantis, on Paradise Island in the Bahamas.

Irvine, 52, said she was recruited to write the book by a friend who works for the company that owns the resort. That company, Kerzner International, published the book.

She spent about a year working on it, interviewing 80 people, traveling to Mississippi and the Bahamas, and immersing herself in the worlds of dolphins and hurricanes. She said she was touched by the spirit of the survivors - both human and animal.

As one of the few "feel-good" stories to emerge from Katrina, the dolphins developed quite a following, especially in Mississippi. Families who lost their homes visited the dolphins, at both the temporary facility in Gulfport and then at Atlantis, and took away worthwhile lessons in resiliency, Irvine said.

So when the majority owner of Marine Life announced he was selling the dolphins to Atlantis - reportedly

for \$3 million - controversy and litigation followed.

Irvine touches only briefly on the dispute in the book. She said she didn't want the politics to detract from the story.

"It's not an expose."

Her book also nudges another thorny issue: Why, amid all the human suffering caused by Katrina, did people care so much about saving dolphins?

"Part of it is rooting for the underdog," Irvine said. "Animals can be very comforting, helping people cope with difficult things in their own lives. The essence of animals touches people in their hearts."

One of the dolphins, Tessie, suffered a relapse from a fungal infection after arriving at Atlantis and died in December 2006. But the others appear to be doing well. Three have even given birth - "the happiest of endings," Irvine writes, "as well as new beginnings."

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