

U.S. Navy sea mammals hunt for targets

by Steve Liewer

SAN DIEGO - The way his Navy handlers see it, Strober the sea lion has a pretty good life.

Like the other sea lions and dolphins in the Navy's marine-mammal program at Point Loma Naval Base, he has his own room, a 30-by-30-foot enclosure in San Diego Bay. His space includes a dock he can climb on to soak up some rays. He can swim to other rooms to hang out with his buddies.

Each day he goes to work, plunging up to 500 feet to retrieve markers used in antisubmarine warfare exercises from the bottom of sea. He earns fish as a reward each time he completes a dive.

"They work on it really hard," said Dru Clark, a Navy sea lion trainer, during a rare news media opportunity to observe the marine mammals Thursday. "(Strober) has flown all over the world recovering targets."

Most of the time, the 105 Navy sea lions and dolphins retrieve markers or practice other skills, such as guarding military ports against saboteurs or learning to spot and notify handlers of undersea mines.

Then the Navy announced this year that it is considering deploying some of its marine mammals to Washington State's Puget Sound to guard the Naval submarine base at Bangor.

Environmental activists and biologists successfully challenged a similar plan in 1989. They argued the chilly waters of Puget Sound - about 10 degrees cooler than San Diego Bay - endangered the health of the Navy's Atlantic bottlenose dolphins, whose natural habitat is warmer seas. A federal judge stopped the deployment until the military could show evidence the mammals wouldn't be harmed.

MAMMALS - Jen Patten, a dolphin trainer, got Koa, 14-year-old male, ready yesterday at Point Loma Naval Base. Navy sea lions and dolphins military ports and notify handlers of undersea mines. Photo by Peggy Peattie.

MAMMALS - Sarah Radloff rewards her sea lion Joe, 7, after he tagged a bouy, which the crew was then able to retrieve. The Point Loma Naval Base's Space and Naval Warfare Systems San Diego showed off their dolphins and sea lions to the media. Photo by Peggy Peattie.

Navy veterinarians say they have done that, using dolphins in cold climates such as Alaska and Newfoundland and hot places like the Persian Gulf in the years since.

"We have a lot more information now than we had in 1989," said Mark Xitco, the branch director of the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center San Diego biosciences division. "We've developed technology. We can heat or cool their water to keep the tanks in temperatures where they're comfortable."

Xitco said the mammals' metabolisms are constantly monitored. They are attended to immediately if they show any sign of problems.

"No mission priority will come higher than the health and safety of the animals," he said.

Some critics remain skeptical. Several turned out two weeks ago at public meetings in Seattle and Keyport, Wash., according to news accounts.

Susan Scheirman is part of a group on Bainbridge Island, Wash., that gathered to knit sweaters and scarves for the dolphins to keep them warm - as well as wrote letters of objection to the Navy.

"It's obviously tongue-in-cheek," said Scheirman. "But we think that the whole idea of bringing these warm-water dolphins into cold water is absurd."

The Navy's marine mammal program dates to the late 1950s, said Mike Rothe, biosciences division director, when biologists realized sea lions' keen eyesight and dolphins' sonar suited them to hunt for underwater targets. They were used to guard Cam Ranh Bay during the Vietnam War and later taught to spot mines and attach leg cuffs to unauthorized swimmers.

In the 1990s, the Pentagon planned to phase out the program and replace the mammals with electronic systems. So the Navy gave away about 55 of the 140 animals then in the program to marine theme parks. But the technology lagged, and in 1997 the program began building up again with a breeding program that has boosted the number of sea lions and dolphins to 105.

"We're still trying to figure out how their sonar works, so we can put ourselves out of business," said Braden Duryee, the program's operations supervisor.

The animals were sent to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf to protect Navy sites from 2003 to 2005 and are used to guard a submarine base in Georgia.

Rothe said the Navy hasn't decided whether it will deploy the mammals to Puget Sound. He said a decision isn't likely for as much as two years.

Critics hope it doesn't happen.

"I just don't like seeing marine mammals put to use for war games," said Susan Berta, co-founder of the Orca Network in Greenbank, Wash. "Maybe dolphins like war. But I have a feeling they don't."

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