



Marine Mammal Stranding Program
UCSC Long Marine Lab

Speaking with the Public about Marine Mammals

When responding to marine mammals on the beach, you will often encounter members of the public from a wide variety of backgrounds. Most people are generally interested in marine mammals and will inquire regarding what species you are responding to, why it died, and what it is that you will be doing with the carcass. We view all interactions with the public as an opportunity to educate interested members of the public about marine mammals and the marine mammal stranding network.

As a representative of the Long Marine Lab Stranding Network it is important that you are aware of how to answer questions, and sometimes handle complaints, in a polite and informed manner. Some of the most common questions/comments that you may encounter when on a stranding include:

- 1) What species is that?
- 2) Why did it die?
- 3) When did it die?
- 4) Is it dangerous?
- 5) Are you going to remove it?
- 6) Was it killed by fishermen?
- 7) This carcass has been here for a day, a week, a month...why hasn't anyone responded?
- 8) Why are you not going to remove the carcass?
- 9) General questions about the species on the beach.

As a stranding volunteer, there are a few guidelines we would like you to follow when answering questions from members of the public.

- 1) Always be polite and courteous to members of the public. Federal dollars fund this program and it is an important opportunity for public outreach and education. You are also representing Long Marine Lab in an official capacity.
- 2) Answer the questions to the best of your ability but observe your own limitations. Do not speculate about cause of death or other questions to which you may not know the answer. Instead, say that you are unsure but that you would be happy to give them a resource where they can find more information or you can take their contact information and we can contact them with further information.
- 3) Many people want to know why an animal died. The vast majority of the time, we do not know the cause of death (COD). If an animal will be brought back to the lab, you can inform the person that we will be doing a necropsy to try and determine COD. If the animal is too decomposed, the honest answer is that we don't know but you may also tell the person that marine mammals often die of the same types of maladies that

humans die from. They can get cancer, have heart attacks, or die from “old age” just as people do. Explain that when an animal reaches such a decomposed state, it is nearly impossible to determine why it died.

- 4) Many people are mainly interested in who is going to remove a stinky carcass from the beach and when that will happen. Depending on the beach, how populated it is, and whether we are going to perform a necropsy dictates whether the carcass will be removed. In general we are not required to remove or bury carcasses from the beach unless we perform a necropsy or internal exam on a carcass but we also want to be good neighbors. We work closely with local police, park rangers, and life guards to determine the best course of action. When confronted by a member of the public that would like to know when a carcass will be removed, the best answer is to explain that strandings are a natural occurrence, and in time, nature will take care of the carcass, either through decomposition on the beach or by washing it out with the tide. In very populated areas, the local municipality or state parks representative will choose to bury the carcass or remove it from the beach. You can inform the person that once our examination is complete, our stranding coordinator will alert the local officials with jurisdiction that they can bury or remove the carcass.
- 5) If someone approaches you and says they are from any type of media service, you should refer them to the stranding cell number. Reporters do not usually announce that they are reporters. If you notice that the person is asking a lot of questions and/or writing down your answers you should politely ask whether they are from the media. If they are a reporter, let them know that they need to contact the stranding coordinator with their questions. Our stranding coordinator will be more than happy to answer any questions they may have.