

Ice Entrapped White Beaked Dolphins February 17-19, 2009 Seal Cove White Bay, Newfoundland

On Wednesday afternoon Feb. 17, 2009, the Whale Release and Strandings Group was notified of five "porpoises" entrapped in the ice-covered harbour of Seal Cove in the White Bay in northeastern Newfoundland. Species identification confirmed the animals were white-beaked dolphins. Arrangements were made immediately to visit the area but a severe snowstorm on February 18 prevented the team driving the 8 hours to reach the area. I left on the morning of February 19 and arrived in Baie Verte to check with a DFO Fisheries Officer there, who had been monitoring the entrapment and giving us regular updates on the condition of the dolphins and the state of the ice. I picked up a fisherman in Baie Verte, whose longliner we were planning to use for getting into the area, and the four of us proceeded to Seal Cove.

When we arrived we witnessed the rescue attempt by five local people in a fiberglass speedboat. The open-water area where the dolphins had been swimming had collapsed due to the intervention of the speedboat and three of the dolphins were seen in this jumbled ice. The intervention had frightened the animals and they had scattered from the original hole. To my dismay, I watched as two men walked about the ice trying to capture the dolphins when they appeared in small holes. This continued until only one of the dolphins remained at the surface. This dolphin was tied to the boat and pulled through the ice, often circling close to the propeller. When untied in a larger lead of water the dolphin began circling in a manner I have often seen when beach-stranded whales are brought to deeper water - and those animals often strand again as a result of extreme stress.

Our response has been criticized for being too late. What was our plan for a rescue? As I always do in every ice entrapment, I had planned to assess the ice in the harbour and nearby, study the area ice charts, and, consult the marine weather forecast and plan with the DFO officers in the area and local people who could help with logistics. We had secured the services of a longliner who could possibly break the animals out to open water. It appeared that the incoming weather was likely to open leads in the ice of the harbour and White Bay.

To avoid stressing the animals, and seeing that the hole the four dolphins were occupying appeared to be stable, I would have waited until the weather caused such ice changes. The dolphins probably would have been fine in the hole they were in as their body movement was keeping it open enough for them to reach the surface to breathe and they are well suited to survive for lengthy periods of time in those breathing holes surrounded by ice. As predicted, the warming air temperature with east and southwest winds opened up the ice in White bay and on February 20 the situation would have been conducive to using the longliner to break the animals out. That in my opinion would have been the best use of resources to get those animals to ice-free waters with minimal stress to them.

Could we definitely have saved all of the dolphins? No one can say for sure. My experience with those situations, which happen quite regularly in our waters, is not very positive. This is a harsh environment during spring when the pack ice moves around our coasts and marine mammals ranging from blue whales to harbour porpoises have been entrapped in similar sorts of events. It is unfortunate that these animals become entrapped, and often it is better to leave the animals in their groups rather than scaring them into the surrounding pack ice. Those are wild animals; they determine interactions with us by bow riding. But when humans think they can determine the level of interaction by whatever means - whether by good intent or lack of knowledge or experience - those animals can become stressed and we can do irreparable damage to them.

Some times people take it upon themselves to try and rescue animals as an act of good intent. This more often than not has the adverse result as happened in Seal Cove. The well-intentioned actions of these individuals, which put themselves at great risk, did not result in the rescue of these dolphins. It appeared to my experienced eyes, and those watching near me that these dolphins were not "saved." From these events I think it would have been more humane to wait from the impending weather change than to intervene in the way that happened. Inexperienced people do not understand the behavior and responses of such animals and can get themselves hurt in the process.

Over the course of this event many people contributed to misinformation and some called for immediate response as did an open line radio show in St. John's. Some people in Seal Cove reacted and when I arrived on the scene a dangerous situation had evolved with people out in a small boat with no life preserving equipment on some. This was a very risky approach, and given the many deaths by accidents at sea, this behavior should not be encouraged or condoned.

Why did I not leave this as a "happy ending" such as some have reported to the media? This certainly would have been much easier to do considering the backlash we received. But I deal in facts, and I don't want to see such incidents happen again. I don't want to risk having a well-intentioned young man die while trying to rescue an animal with which he is totally unfamiliar. It was extremely unfortunate that a blizzard interfered with our plans to respond to this entrapment, but a single day of patience might have changed the outcome of this event, and put fewer human and animal lives at risk.

Wayne Ledwell