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FAU Harbor Branch Mammal Research and Conservation Staff Save Entangled Dolphin in the Indian River Lagoon

BOCA RATON, FL (June 20, 2008) – Mammal Research and Conservation (MMRC) scientists, veterinarians and research staff at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute at Florida Atlantic University intervened and rescued an entangled, young dolphin calf in the Indian River Lagoon (IRL), near Melbourne on Thursday, June 19.

With approval from the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service, the mother/calf pair – well-known to MMRC staff that has been studying the IRL dolphin population since 1996 – was entangled with an automotive belt around its neck. It was first observed by FAU Harbor Branch researchers on June 6 in the IRL, and was monitored while efforts to coordinate logistics were within a fair-weather window.

“This was a team effort and demonstrates the strength and skill of our marine mammal staff and fellow collaborators,” said Steve McCulloch, program manager and rescue supervisor for FAU Harbor Branch MMRC. “This is a remarkable effort considering that we first had to locate one specific dolphin in the IRL region that covers approximately 40 percent of Florida’s east coast. The ‘take home’ message or lesson here is that, what we as humans do, does have a direct impact on the environment that we all share.”

The 3-year-old dolphin calf was sighted south of the 192 Causeway in Melbourne with its mother, who has been in the MMRC photo-id catalog since 2001. The rescue effort involved six boats and 30 people, and was led by FAU Harbor Branch MMRC staff with assistance from National Marine Fisheries Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, Save the Manatee Club, Hubbs Sea-World Research and other specialists trained by FAU Harbor Branch MMRC staff during past dolphin health assessments.

The mother/calf pair was isolated from other dolphins in the area and a net set was made in shallow water so that they could be safely managed, treated and released by FAU Harbor Branch MMRC veterinarian Dr. Juli Goldstein.

Currently, FAU Harbor Branch photo-id research staff is conducting a full-day follow-up to ensure that both mother and calf continue to do well.

FAU Harbor Branch researchers took part in a similar rescue mission in May 2007, when a young dolphin calf was sighted entangled in fishing gear around its neck. The calf also was rescued, treated and released back to its mother as has been the case in several other rescue interventions that FAU Harbor Branch's Marine Mammal staff has carried out in the past.

For more information, contact Stephen McCulloch, program manager for the Marine Mammal Research and Conservation Center at FAU Harbor Branch, at 772-465-2400, ext. 604 or smccull5@hboi.fau.edu.

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PHOTO CAPTIONS:

Image 1: Indian River Lagoon mother/calf pair was first observed on June 6 by FAU Harbor Branch researchers with an automotive belt wrapped around the calf's neck.

Image 2: From left to right, FAU Harbor Branch rescuer Colby Lawrence, Blair Mase of U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service, Dr. Greg O'Corry Crowe of FAU Harbor Branch, and FAU Harbor Branch Program Manager Steve McCulloch. With the dolphin calf safely secured, and the mother dolphin waiting patiently in the distance, rescue staff first evaluate and then prepare to cut away the entanglement with a special net knife.

Image 3: From left to right, FAU Harbor Branch rescuer Colby Lawrence, Blair Mase of U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service, Dr. Greg O'Corry Crowe of FAU Harbor Branch, and FAU Harbor Branch Program Manager Steve McCulloch. While carefully restrained, the reluctant dolphin calf is freed from an automotive belt that would have eventually killed him.

Image 4: FAU Harbor Branch Marine Mammal Veterinarian Dr. Juli Goldstein carefully examines the young dolphin before approving her release, while MMRC Program Manager and Rescue Supervisor Steve McCulloch displays the hard rubber automotive belt that was entangled around the dolphin's neck.