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Sea Lions Hit by High Levels of Acid Poison in California

By **REGAN MORRIS**

LOS ANGELES, June 5 — A distressed, possibly pregnant sea lion was wheeled recently into the Marine Mammal Care Center here, just as two other lions were herded into cages in preparation for their return to the ocean.

“That’s just the way it is,” said Lauren Palmer, the chief veterinarian at the center. “Two go out and more come in.”

Peter Wallerstein of the Whale Rescue Team, a private group authorized by Los Angeles to rescue whales and other marine mammals, said he had found the sea lion on the sand in nearby Manhattan Beach. Mr. Wallerstein said he feared she could have been poisoned by domoic acid, a toxin released by large blooms of algae that causes seizures in sea lions.

Southern California marine mammal hospitals have been overwhelmed by sea lions sick from the acid, which appeared in record levels off the coast of Los Angeles in April. Domoic acid poisoning has killed hundreds of the animals across Southern California this spring and thousands since a major outbreak in 2002, and has also afflicted animals in Monterey Bay, south of San Francisco.

“In over 22 years of marine mammal rescues, I’ve never seen such distress of marine mammals,” Mr. Wallerstein said. “The stress and the fright, it’s kind of shocking.”

The center here has taken in about 120 sea lions since March 1 and about 70 of those are suspected of having domoic acid poisoning, Dr. Palmer said. So far, about 35 percent of those who were found to have the poisoning have died; others have recovered and have been released, she said.

Some sea lions at the center were young, emaciated pups, tiny bones poking through their sleek coats.

On April 26, domoic acid toxin levels in plankton along the Los Angeles coast were twice the previous recorded high, said Astrid Schnetzer, a research professor at the Caron Lab for Marine Environmental Biology at the [University of Southern California](http://www.usc.edu). The toxin levels have since dissipated, but Ms. Schnetzer said a recurrence was possible.

With an estimated population of 200,000 to 300,000, California sea lions are nowhere near endangered, but the deaths and the high toxin levels have scientists and environmentalists concerned. Ms. Schnetzer said scientists at the Caron Lab could not explain the high levels but were studying a combination of factors like [climate change](#), pollution and nutrients in the water.

Dr. Palmer and others emphasized that the commercial fish available in grocery stores and restaurants was safe because of government monitoring. Joe Cordero of the [National Marine Fisheries Service](#), however, did urge anyone fishing off piers in Southern California to think twice before eating the catch (although he said the toxins generally appear in fish guts, not the flesh).

About 50 dolphins, a minke whale and scores of sea birds have also been killed by this season's toxic algae bloom, said Mr. Cordero, who had also monitored the two wayward humpback whales in the Sacramento River and dismissed suggestions that they were affected by domoic acid.

Mr. Wallerstein said he had seen a change this season with more male sea lions and pups becoming sick. Normally, domoic poisoning affects pregnant sea lions, mainly because blooms come at the same time as the spring breeding season, when pregnant sea lions eat more.

Last month, on the rocky beach in the Los Angeles district of San Pedro, Mr. Wallerstein watched proudly as the two rehabilitated sea lions and two abandoned elephant seal pups clambered awkwardly into the sea.

"I very rarely get to see that," Mr. Wallerstein said of the two lions, frolicking in the surf before heading out to sea.

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