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Title : Post-release behavior and survival of three phocid species rehabilitated in Alaska

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Abstract : The effectiveness of marine mammal rehabilitation programs is typically evaluated through post-release survival. However, survival data alone may not provide sufficient information about the success of the rehabilitation (i.e., does the released animal use the same haul out sites, foraging areas, and migratory paths as free-ranging animals? Are rehabilitated seal pups constrained in their ability to dive or forage efficiently when released?) Satellite-linked time-depth recorders (STDR) provide longitudinal data on location and dive behavior, thus providing insight into the "period of adjustment"; for released animals. STDRs were used to assess the post-release survival and behavior of harbor seals (Phoca vitulina), ringed seals (Phoca hispida) and a Northern elephant seal (Mirounga angustirostris) rehabilitated at the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward, Alaska. The elephant seal was admitted as a juvenile, the harbor seals and ringed seals were rehabilitated as pups. Location and dive behavior data were collected and correlated with bathymetric, fish stock, and tracking data from wild-caught cohorts, when available. Initial data indicate that animals released to locations without cohorts leave the release area within a week, regardless of prey availability. Animals released to a population of the same species remain with that population. Harbor and ringed seals released without cohorts traveled short distances to and from the release sight for several days before permanently leaving the area. The elephant seal left the release sight in the Gulf of Alaska immediately and traveled to British Columbia, returned within a month, and in close proximity to the original rescue sight, and then traveled south to Oregon. Despite restricted access to 6m deep pools during rehabilitation, all the animals dove at typical foraging depths and durations for the species within days of release, suggesting that diving ability was fully developed prior to release.