

A Capture Cage for Entangled Sea Lions

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Abstract

Marine pollution is a serious and increasingly visible problem, affecting many forms of marine life, often with severe consequences. At haul-outs at Yaquina Bay in Newport, Oregon (latitude 44.6301°N, longitude 124.0523°W), California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*) frequently appear with various forms of entanglement in marine debris, typically plastic "packing bands" wrapped tightly around the neck, cutting into the animal's skin, blubber and muscle. But despite the proximity of these animals to a public viewing pier, they have been practically inaccessible to would-be rescuers. Because entangled animals are generally active and defensive, options for removing debris are very limited. Sea lions will not tolerate close approach and administering anesthesia without concurrent restraint is deemed too dangerous for the animals since a sea lion injected with drugs by a pole or dart would likely flee to the water only to subsequently drown.

A new option is currently being developed to respond to entangled sea lions in Newport. Beginning March 2010, a custom-built capture cage has been deployed adjacent to pre-existing floating docks commonly used as haul-outs. The cage is basically a modified floating dock enclosed on four sides by a galvanized steel structure (4 x 2.8 x 2.15 meters), with sliding guillotine doors on two sides. It's designed primarily to serve as an additional haul out area for sea lions, with doors positioned locked in the open position so animals can comfortably come and go as they choose. Once entangled sea lions are observed inside the cage, responders from the Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network will be sent to close the cage doors in order to confine an entangled animal so safe and proper removal of entangling debris can be performed under anesthesia by veterinarians.

The cage was modeled on designs used by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for the capture of sea lions on the Columbia River. Collaborating partners in this project include Animal Medical Care of Newport, the Port of Newport, the Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network, the Oregon State University Marine Mammal Institute, the Oregon Coast Aquarium, and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The Problem



Sea lions frequently appear on waterfront docks with entanglements of plastic packing bands, monofilament, and fishing lures but will not allow rescuers to approach them.



A Potential Solution

This cage will give us an opportunity to temporarily confine affected animals and safely remove entanglements.

