News and Views

Soundings, the Newsletter of the International Marine Animal Trainers Association, Volume 15, number 4, the 1990 Fall number, reports that the new Oceanarium at the John G. Shedd Aquarium in Chicago will not now open till March 1991, due to trouble with the paint on the pool walls.

It also has a long interview with Dr Randall S. Wells, of the Brookfield Zoo, Chicago, on the initial stages of his work with wild dolphins in Sarasota Bay, Florida. He was continuing work begun there over 20 years ago. One of his most important findings, and one which is continually confirmed by further studies, is the high degree of 'site fidelity' shown by the local population. That means that animals, who are free to roam unlimited areas of the oceans, prefer to remain in the same areas. Indeed some of those animals were tagged over 20 years ago and yet are still around in the same area. There they are living with offspring from two further generations. He also found—contrary to some popular belief—that the females did not belong to a 'harem'. Females were giving birth to calves sired by different males, although remaining in the same area. Indeed individual females could mate with different sires for a number of calves. In the period from 1980 to 1987, about 20% of calves born died during their first year of life.

Listed at the end of the article were the titles of 18 of the publications of Dr Wells referring to his studies there.

Journal of Zoology, Volume 222, part 2, of September 1990, contains an article by M. N. Bester discussing reproduction in the male sub-Antarctic fur seal. Full adulthood was not reached until 10–11 years of age. All adult males were reproductively quiescent between May and July—perhaps due to photoperiodic cueing.

Also in the same number, Dr John Harwood, of the Sea Mammal Research unit in Cambridge, gave a brief review of all the factors then known about the 1988 seal epizootic. This report was based on the Scientific Meeting held in London in November 1989.

Journal of Zoology, Volume 222, part 3, of November 1990, included an article by S. D. Carter *et al.*, on Immune responses of the common seal to canine distemper antigens during an outbreak of phocid distemper viral infection. They found that adults had high antibody titres, and might be protected for future years, whereas the younger seals did not develop high levels of antibodies. This might be because the younger animals had not encountered the virus, or had not developed an effective immunity.

Journal of Zoology, Volume 222, part 4, contained an article by Wilkinson and Bester on the duration of post-weaning fast and local dispersion of the southern elephant seal at Marion Island.

Veterinary Record of 17 November 1990, recorded that scientists at the Department of Agriculture in Northern Ireland had identified the cause of a disease which had resulted in the deaths of more than 400 striped dolphins, off the Mediterranean coast of Spain, in the previous few months. The agent was a morbillivirus, similar to the one that killed porpoises in the Irish Sea in September 1988, and also affected more than 18 000 seals off the European coasts in the same year.

The same journal of 8 December, carries Seamus Kennedy's full review of the 1988 European seal morbilli-virus epizootic. The same virus had killed several thousand Lake Baikal seals in 1987 and 1988. There is also evidence of infection in Greenland harp seals, ringed seals and Dutch common seals. Antibodies to a morbillivirus have been found in bottlenose dolphins from the eastern coast of the USA. Further work is needed to ascertain whether these sea mammal populations have been infected with the phocine distemper virus.

In 1988, Seamus Kennedy found 6 porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*), with morbillivirus lesions. Recent reports of dolphin losses in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean now exceed 400.

The same journal of 22/29 December, reports Dr S. J. Mayer's efforts to rear and rehabilitate 22 common seal pups. Eighteen survived, and were released, but 4 died. On arrival at the rescue centre, mean body weight was 9.2 ± 2.1 kg, but after an average stay of 14.2 ± 2.3 weeks, this rose to 35.5 ± 3.5 kg. All the animals were tagged for future recognition and a liquidised herring based diet was used. It also reports that 20% of the seals now in the Waddensea had already been treated at a rehabilitation centre.

Dolphin Data Base News, Volume 2, number 6, draws attention to the unusually large mass die-offs of marine mammals in the last 2–3 years. It lists harbour and grey seals along the European coastline, Stellar sea lions in the North Pacific, coastal bottlenose dolphins in the Atlantic, and an approximately sixfold increase in the strandings of bottlenose dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico. Since a common cause has not yet been proven, suspicion, as always, falls on

'environmental pollution'. Without doubting that this could be the case, should it not be remembered that the increase in interest and in actual observations might have, in themselves, resulted in more reports, whereas previously the lack of such interest would have overlooked similar deaths, or strandings? In the USA, the Dolphin Protection Consumer Information Act of 1990 (S.B.2044) now requires warning labels to be fixed to tins of tuna, where these fish have been caught in a way that can cause harm to dolphins.

In the same country, the Dolphin Project is calling for a boycott of all Anheuser-Busch products until 'Sea World Marine Parks' (which they own) cease the capture of all cetacea and improve the quality of life for their dolphins by abolishing all petting/feeding pools. Those of us who have experience of such places may well agree that such practices are outmoded, and indeed some believe should never have been allowed in the interests of the animals welfare.

Newsletter of the Cetacean Specialist Group, in October 1990, reported that the levels of organochlorine pollutants in striped dolphin carcasses found in the Mediterranean recently, reached up to 280 ppm PCB's in the blubber. However this level was not the direct cause of the epidemic—neither were the high levels of parasitism—but both together weakened the animals immune systems and facilitated the spread of viral infection.

Marine Mammal Science, Volume 6, number 4, contains articles on: Blue Whale distribution in the eastern tropical Pacific, rates of, and potential causes of, mortality in the North Atlantic Right Whale population, size and breeding season of the Antarctic fur seal, sexual dimorphism in the bottlenose dolphin population off the east coast of Florida, predation of a ringed seal and a black guillemot by a Pacific walrus, methods for obtaining skin samples from living sperm whales, and morphometric comparison of Minke whales from different areas of the north Atlantic.

Beluga, Volume 2, number 1, reports on the number of autopsies performed in the S. Lawrence River marine park. 20 beached carcasses were recovered in the Quebec area, compared with 21 in 1988. The average age of the adults was 22 years (male/female 50/50). Only one carcass was of a calf. The results of the autopsies were very similar to 1988—digestive tract ulcers, a high rate of pulmonary problems, periodontal disease was common, as was mastitis (4 out of 6 animals), and there were a large number of unspecified tumours. The animals had higher levels of mercury and lead than were found in Arctic specimens, but the main concern remains the levels of Mirex—72 times higher than that found in the Arctic. Unfortunately this study of the carcasses, being expensive to carry out, ceases in 1991, but a final report will be issued for the whole of the study period, 1988–1991, in the near future.