

Spending the Night with Dawn

I left my wife sleeping in our bed in order to spend the rest of the night with Dawn.

I drove past the dark facades, long since darkened, down the village streets, all rolled up, down, down to the sea to get to her. She was waiting for me, although she had other company as well.

She was singularly beautiful. A clear, full moon overhead revealing her graceful lines and those eyes; eyes that I had strained to gaze into for the last three weeks.

Her eyes transfixed you. One look was the hook; you would do anything for her.

I slid into the water silently, careful not to wake any of the neighbors or disturb Dawn. I was mindful of the fact that this was, after all, a "hospital zone". I approached her. The first touch of her glistening skin brought it all back, and I sighed and smiled as I swam, holding, guiding her lightly.

Dawn is a whale. A Short Fin Pilot Whale, one of a pod that had stranded during my first year in the Florida Keys.

My wife Layna was then working for the preeminent dive shop in Key Largo, Atlantis Dive Center, and her boss, the inestimable Spencer Slate volunteered the lot of us for the round-the-clock care the whales would need to recover.

Several animals died shortly after stranding, and now Dawn and Karen were the only ones left. The Marine Mammal Conservancy, with a great amount of assistance from Dolphin's Plus in Key Largo, was racing the clock to rehabilitate these two individuals and locate a free pod so they could reintroduce them to the wild.

Pilot Whales (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*) are members of the

toothed whale family, and toothed whales and dolphins strand occasionally in the shallow waters off the east coast. No one knows why for sure, although much research has been done. Strong theories range from simple disease of the alpha leader to U.S. Naval acoustic testing.

At any rate, the strandings are real. When they occur, the Stranding Network, a loose affiliation of marine institutions and volunteers, are called up to assist in helping our cousins from the sea.

On this given evening- actually 2AM- Layna was staying home with the kids and I volunteered to take the over-night shift 2AM to 6AM. I would spend 4 hours in the water swimming with a whale, then head home to shower, shave and head up to my sales job in Miami.

My main job in the water was to keep Dawn, emaciated, sunburned and bloated, swimming upright. The danger was to have her roll over or sink while attempting to breath, and our goal was to keep water from entering her blow hole. We were to also keep mental notes about her condition, periodically taking vital signs such as heart and respiration rates. If an emergency were to come up, we had pagers and cell phones to summon veterinarians and marine specialists minutes away on stand-by.

Dawn and Karen were still several weeks away from release; Karen was much stronger and a bit mellow, but Dawn, riding much too high in the water, still needed swimming assistance. She became my favorite because of her feistiness. The other volunteers were laughingly called her a brat, and indeed she was. She seemed to know that we were all there to help, but she did not enjoy being "in the hospital" and I admired her for her that.



Dawn (top) and Karen

Dawn and Karen had a long way to go. Indeed the permits needed to release them hadn't even been applied for yet, since no Short-Finned Pilot Whale in history had yet been rehabilitated enough for release. Dawn's beleaguered breathing was mirroring all of us, as we were all holding our breath.

Karen constantly swam over to check on Dawn throughout the night and occasionally tried to position herself between us.

I had been in the water for a couple hours, by this time alone with her, an incredible full moon and a quilt of stars keeping us both company, when all of a sudden Dawn gave some thought to checking out. She rolled and took a header for the bottom. I went along with her, gently attempting to coax her back to the surface. How does a 160 pound man "gently" coax a half-ton whale to the surface of a twenty foot deep tidal lagoon? I am still not sure, although I do remember the cramps in my legs after regaining the surface with her. She breathed a shallow breath as her blow hole popped open and I could hear and smell her exhalations. Two more times this would happen.

By 5:45 other volunteers began to show up and I was ready to be relieved. I was cold and tired but felt solidly in this world. Dawn and Karen would both get medical attention this morning, having shots of antibiotics, and vitamins and Pedialyte “tubed” into them using ¾” plastic tubing and an enormous funnel. Then whole herring would be offered as food. Hopefully they would continue to eat on their own and grow stronger. If not, a fish gruel would be prepared and fed to them via the tubing method.

Weeks went by and they both got stronger. During the rehab, my young daughter Stephanie got the extraordinary experience of seeing Dawn and Karen and to this day would do anything for them. I had unknowingly recruited one of the faithful!

Ultimately, I am proud to say, we were successful in releasing Dawn and Karen near a large pod of dolphins about half way between Miami and Bimini in the Bahamas.

We released them in conjunction with three animals being cared for by Seaquarium in Miami, and let them all go together, hopefully to form their own pod or find another.

Radio tags allowed for tracking over the next few days and much was learned. Layna and I were present during the release and it is hard to describe how we felt seeing Dawn and Karen slip into their true realm and never look back.



The release

We were just rookie volunteers at that time, but tears streamed down our cheeks as we watched them go.

I silently thanked Dawn for a star studded night alone with one beautiful lady.

To help or learn more go to

<http://www.marinemammalconservancy.org/>