

**TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEWEE: Heidi Whitehead**

**INTERVIEWER: David Todd**

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**Google Voice** [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

**David Todd** [00:00:05] All right. Well, I'm so glad you could call. And I hope you can spare a little bit of time. We'll try to make this brief. I know you've got lots of other things going on.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:00:15] Oh, sure, no problem.

**David Todd** [00:00:17] And before we jump into this, let me just say a few sort of disclaimers here. This is some boilerplate I should recite and get your okay with. So, let's see, with your approval of the Whitehead, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas for a book and a Web site for Texas A&M University Press and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas here in Austin. And you would have equal rights to use the recording as you wish. I want to ask about the OK with you.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:01:10] Sure. No problem.

**David Todd** [00:01:13] Well, good. Well, let's get started. According to my calendar, it is Thursday, April 30th, 2020. And we are conducting an interview with Heidi Whitehead, who is the executive director for the Marine Mammal Stranding Network here in Texas. And I am not sure where you are. This is, of course, a telephone interview. But where are you speaking from?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:01:42] I'm, I'm actually in League City, Texas. And, of course, working from my home right now during this COVID 19. But I'm usually stationed at our rehabilitation and research center in Galveston, Texas.

**David Todd** [00:01:58] I see. OK, well, today, with your help, I really like to learn about maybe serve a primer intro course on marine mammal strandings on the Texas coast, particularly those involving bottlenose dolphins and. I was hoping that you might start this by just telling us a little bit about your education and career that put you into this stranding work and got you involved with the network.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:02:33] Yeah, absolutely. So I actually grew up loving dolphins. I think I owe that, I was really inspired by my visits to marine parks, which is one of the many reasons why I feel they are important because they help us to learn to protect what we love. So I grew up with the love for, for dolphins that ended up actually taking a different path and went into working in the dental field. And I was actually working at a local hospital and went down for

lunch during an Earth Day event. And there was a community outreach booth there for the Texas Marine Mammal Stranding Network manned by some staff and volunteers. And that's how I first found out about even that their work existed with dolphins. I knew I would love to work with dolphins in some capacity, but hadn't really been introduced to kind of the stranding aspect and then the rescue aspect of that. So that really drew my attention.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:03:41] So later, I became a trained volunteer and really just knew right away that that's what I wanted to do. So I began basically volunteering every chance I could get. I worked a lot of the overnight, midnight to 4 a.m. shifts, working, you know, watching over animals for behavioral observations and really helping out wherever they needed it. With necropsies or taks that other volunteers may not be as readily available for. So that was about 2002 when I started volunteering. And I learned so much just through volunteering because there is, you know, few paid staff. So the volunteers get opportunities to do a lot. And I also began working part time as funding was available for the organization from office manager to education coordinator and eventually became the regional stranding coordinator for the Galveston area. And that really prepared me to take on the state operations coordinator position in 2005. So since then, I've been overseeing the state's marine mammal operations under a standing agreement with National Marine Fisheries Service and with the help of some amazing staff and volunteers.

**David Todd** [00:05:05] So this network that you're at the helm of, the Texas Marine Mammal Stranding Network. Can you sort of reel us back and maybe tell us why it exists in the first place, how it was formed as far as you know.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:05:25] Yeah. So I think the primary reason that the organization was formed is because there was an effort to begin along with the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. There was an effort to learn more about marine mammals and why they required that protection and to really get a better handle on what human effects were having on marine mammals as well. So I think one of the main reasons that the stranding network was formed and continues to exist is, one, because there is a demonstrated need. That demonstrated need really is for the continuation of knowledge of marine mammals. And also, in Texas, we have such an expansive coastline that we see a large number of stranded cetaceans occurring. So we see an average of around 130 cetaceans, primarily dolphins, that strand each year. Also dolphins, you know, they're very charismatic species and members of the public are always sad to find them when they're dead on the beach. They want to know what happened to them. They're desperate for someone to respond and help the animals when they're on the beach, whether it be social media, folks on the ferry, you know, anywhere on the coastal area, people will tell you that they love dolphins. So that's what enables us to acquire the majority of our support from individual donors. However, it's so much more than that, when they realize the importance of the species and learned more about oceans and human health.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:07:14] Why, how it exists, I think is definitely with those generous supporters and partnerships. And one hundred percent of the dedication of of staff and leadership. It's just so much more than a job to them. It's a, it's a way of life. And it really is. Extremely physically and emotionally demanding. It really requires 100 percent dedication, particularly with a network only having two full time staff for the entire coastline. So without a parent institution, such as a university or aquarium, we rely on all of these pieces of the puzzle to come together, so to speak, so that we're able to draw upon generosity for funding, which is really a feat in itself because we we do have one of the largest territories of any stranding network in the United States.

**David Todd** [00:08:16] What a nice introduction of why a group exists and how it works. Any sort of comments on what its overall goals are, short and long term?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:08:33] We would like to definitely continue our knowledge of of maine mammals and particularly our, our long term goals is conservation. So conservation through all of these aspects of the organization - rescue, when we when we rescue a dolphin, we learn so much about that animal, rehabilitation, through these extensive diagnostics that we complete, such as a C.T. scan, and bronchoscopies and all of these things that allow us to learn more about the animals and potentially different etiologies that they are working with. So it's our goal to continue that, not only to protect the resource, but also to learn more and grow our knowledge for marine mammals and then to share that with the public and to work with other stranding networks and collaborate with researchers to grow that knowledge.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:09:33] And then also helping the public and educate them on, you know, what they can do to help conserve marine mammals, because we find that, we encounter so many people that have good intentions, but then they have actions that may be putting these wild dolphins in dangerous positions where they may become entangled or develop unnatural behaviors and things like that. So it's important for us to educate the public because once they become aware, they they understand better.

**David Todd** [00:10:16] You know, in speaking of the public, I'd be curious to hear and I guess this is maybe just speculation because maybe it's pretty deep-rooted, but what is it about dolphins that makes them so charismatic? And people seem to have this instinctive attraction to them; the dolphins have such a gut appeal to people. Have you heard people speak to you about that, or do you have some insights there?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:10:48] I think, you know, they may say, I think some folks have mentioned it even started out with, you know, Flipper many years ago. Lots of people refer to Flipper. Also, I just, I think the way that that show portrayed that an animal and a human could have a connection. And I think that putting a bottlenose dolphin as the face of that may have led folks to to really feel a connection with the bottlenose dolphins.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:11:24] Also, as I mentioned, marine parks, to get a chance to see them, get close to them. Bottlenose dolphins are, as a species, that is more popular in marine parks and more widely held. So that maybe increased exposure to them.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:11:41] Also, they are more or less the species that we see when you're out on the water, on the coast.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:11:47] And they're just intelligent animals. I know when they come in to rehabilitation with us. And there was just an article, a peer-reviewed article recently published about the different personalities that that these dolphins actually have. And we've really seen that in our work with them, that they do display different personalities and really displays their level of intelligence and encourages those that work with them and particularly our volunteers a connection with them.

**David Todd** [00:12:27] I guess that people have been fortunate to see them in marine parks and maybe off the coast. But I imagine that most of us have never really had close encounters, and I'm curious if you could give us some examples of the intelligence or personalities that you witnessed and how you come to that conclusion.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:12:55] Yes. For rehabilitation, we sometimes have animals in rehabilitation for months on end. Some of them are, you know, deemed non-releasable, which gives us a chance to interact with them and to provide some social stimulation. And we see them react differently. So we provide different types of enrichment, such as, essentially, their toys. But we may also provide some environmental enrichment, such as water sprayers, you know live fish, different things that that they might find interesting in their environment and their reactions to these types of enrichment are very different. So some may be extremely playful. Some may be more shy and hold back. Some are interested in people. Others are not. You really see their temperament, the difference in their temperament from when we're working with them. Some are more docile and laid back, while others are, you know, very feisty. So we see really their reactions and the course of working with them helps us to see kind of their different personalities.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:14:15] So also they become very, very smart. When we're working with them, they know, they pick up on different cues and know when medical procedures might be happening. Such as they pick up on maybe that the water is dropping and that we're going to complete a blood draw on them. And some animals would just be glad to have that human interaction. And other animals would, would really start what I would call plotting ways to get out of a medical procedure or ways to get around the staff. So we see lots of differences in them.

**David Todd** [00:14:57] Interesting. And I just often these are single animals that you pick up. But do you ever have the opportunity to have more than one dolphin together and to sort of see how they interact with each other?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:15:16] We have had a few cases historically. It is rare, but we may have, for example, we've had a mom and calf strand together. Post one of our tropical storms, we had two dolphin, you know, within several yards, strand of each other that came into rehab for a short period. And it is, it is very interesting to see, you know, how they are able to interact with one another. And we also get a lot of insight from our wild population research. They go out and do boat-based surveys where we learn different individuals in the wild. We're able to identify them and we learn their social structure of their group and how they interact. And so that really gives us a picture of how they interact with each other in the wild.

**David Todd** [00:16:15] Interesting. Well, so from your work with these dolphins in and through your partners in the network, I'm curious what you've learned about why these dolphins strand and, you know, if you've been able to figure out what some of the major factors might be behind them coming ashore and having illnesses.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:16:50] So we've definitely seen a variety of different etiologies. Dealing with facts such as brucellosis, viruses such as morbillivirus, harmful algal bloom and freshwater events. And really it's all related to the health of the ecosystem. So it's really something that we have been keeping a close eye on. We we work with the stranding network that's set up as a whole for the United States, the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program through National Marine Fisheries Service to make sure that we are running these tests for zoonotic disease, as well as other disease and viruses that we can share that data with, with other networks so that we're making sure that we're keeping a handle on those types of things in the event that there is an outbreak or an unusual die-off. So those are some of the more common reasons that we see here on the Texas coast, is the brucellosis, as well as we've seen some harmful algal bloom related events and we're, we're doing more research on, on both of those, because while we might be able to detect it in the

animal, it's important for us to have baseline on the population. And does this bacteria potentially occur in these animals, but it's not lethal? Same thing with harmful algal blooms - is it normal for them to have a certain level of this biotoxins in their system? But it may not necessarily be the reason why they, why they die, or why they come to the beach. So we have to work very hard to collect systematic samples over the course of many years and develop what we feel is baseline for our specific populations. So that's what we've been working to do, and get some of those published studies out about the level of biotoxin data we're getting ready to to try to publish something on 10 years of biotoxin data that we've collected from dolphins, because really it's hard to prove that it is a cause of death until you know the existence of it and in the population.

**David Todd** [00:19:34] And I guess one of the things that you're trying to figure out is this, if these are naturally occurring maladies or if they're human-caused. Is that fair to say.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:19:50] I think more so it's it's a matter of really just maintaining that healthy ecosystem. So some of these things could, could potentially be related to, you know, for example, these algal blooms could potentially be related to runoff. So reduction of runoff would certainly be important. But our primary role at this point is to just determine what, what's happening. What are we finding in these animals before making any type of key connection to what the actual causes are? We, the information that we collect is all put into a national database. And we also share additional data with the National Marine Fisheries Service as the governing agency. And so any information we find, like for example, test results that come back from animals, are shared with them. And as management for the species, then they are the ones that look to determine what may be the potential causes for those results that we're seeing, what they can do from a management perspective to protect these animals.

**David Todd** [00:21:15] I see. So you would sort of pass these on to some central clearinghouse and lab and they'll try to figure what the causes might be. So tell me about what you saw after major events, whether it was Harvey or Katrina or Deepwater Horizon, did you see a spike in strandings?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:21:52] We have seen several spikes in strandings. Some of those are still being investigated related to certain events such as local spills and then you've got the unusual mortality events. So anytime we see a very unusual spike, an unusual mortality event will be declared by National Marine Fisheries Service. So we, when all of the other networks were experiencing spikes in strandings post Deepwater Horizon, Texas was not included in that unusual mortality event, because we weren't seeing unusual numbers. However, it was important for us to still follow the sampling protocols and enhanced data collection that the other Gulf networks were following so that we make sure that we're not falling behind on the data that we're collecting from Texas animals to compare any differences with what they were seeing and other areas of the Gulf, because obviously dolphins can cross over from Louisiana and Texas waters. So we knew that there was more than likely some crossover, even though we were not officially included in that unusual mortality event.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:23:19] So our unusual mortality events have been deemed in 1990 , 1994, 2007, 2008 and 2012. It's not unusual, and in some cases the causes have gone undetermined and have not been related to any type of specific event. And in other cases, such as 2007, we suspected Brucella as a potential cause due to the number of perinates. But we had a high number of advanced decomposition animals coming in. And then 2008, it was also deemed undetermined, but we were able to document it was the first time exposure to three distinct HABs were documented, or harmful algal bloom toxins, were documented in dolphins

during a mortality event. So that's why we really embarked upon that biotoxin study, is because while we picked up on these three toxins, we couldn't necessarily say that it caused that mortality event. So baseline data is important for proving mortality as well.

**David Todd** [00:24:42] Well, I guess one of the challenges for y'all is that, from what I've read, a lot of the stranded animals are dead or decomposed, and it must be difficult to, you know, do your research when there's, there's really advanced, rotting or, you know, you don't have a lot to work with. Is that fair to say?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:25:06] So it can be a challenge with decomposition, which is why public education has been important for us. So we find that the more we get the word out to report animals, even if they're dead, has been important. So there are many folks that are living on the coast and spending time on the coast that may not realize that a dead dolphin could potentially be important. So there may be delay in reporting. So we work hard to get that word out to help with it. And then also we've, you know, got a situation where we may have five to seven dead dolphins in one day at different areas of the coast, but we have such limited staff and resources that it's hard to get to them all in one day. So then you've got carcasses that may become, you know, more decomposed. So really a major challenge for us, in all of the work that we do is is obviously lack of funds to be able to provide enough resources to really get to them as quickly as possible.

**David Todd** [00:26:23] Well Texas is a big place, and you mentioned that sometimes these strandings happen in really disparate, remote places. Are there localities that suffer more strandings than others, or is it pretty random and widely spread?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:26:43] We do. I don't know if you have seen our regional breakdown for Texas, but for the TMMSN area of responsibility, it puts the whole Texas coast from Rio Grande in south to the Louisiana state line in the north. And so our records have historically all been organized around geographically defined subareas. And so retrievals, statistics are all recorded under regional codes. So we have the Texas coast essentially broken down into six different regions and there are several counties within each region that enables us to assign strandings of a regional IDs for say Sabine Pass, for example, is Jefferson and Chambers County and Galveston region is Galveston, Brazoria, Harris County and so forth. So that really helps us. We're looking at strandings statistics, look at regional statistics as well as a whole.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:27:55] Historically, and for current statistics, we see increases in the Galveston and Port Aransas regions as the highest number of strandings.

**David Todd** [00:28:12] And is there any sort of speculation, though, why there? Are there just more eyes, you know, people and boats frequenting that area? Or do you think that it's because of marine traffic or pollution? Or what do you think might have gone on?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:28:31] Well, it's challenging, there's a lot to consider there. Thankfully, we have some excellent historical records, which we are actually currently collaborating on a study looking at effort and how many animals were reported. So we keep a record of whether the public reports it, or state or federal agency reports the animal. And so we can go back to that historically and and look at the effort that way.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:28:58] But really, I mean, it is reflective of highest populated areas as far as where regional increases are seen. However, we have to take into account that there are also government and state entities that are completing beach surveillance in some of the most

remote areas, such as Matagorda Island and Padre Island National Seashore, where it is less populated, but those features are getting covered more often by federal surveys because there's funding for that. So there may actually be better coverage in some of these remote areas as far as beach surveys are concerned. So there's a lot to think about when it comes to that.

**David Todd** [00:29:45] Complicated. I was looking at some data from NOAA, which I think a lot of the networks, including Texas, contribute to, and it was striking to me. I think that the percentage of strandings involved bottlenose, of all the marine mammals, was over 90 percent - ninety four percent for the last 20 years. Do you have any thoughts about why that might be? Is it just that dolphins were more common or they're closer to shore, they're more susceptible to whatever's afflicting these animals, or what might be going on?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:30:33] So most of what we see are, like you said, greater than 90 percent bottlenose dolphins strandings. It is a species that is most commonly found close to shore, coastal waters or bays. And so a lot of these other species that may come in, such as melon-headed whales or cojeas, are very deep water pelagic species. So they're going to be much further out in the Gulf. So the likelihood that that animal would end up on our beaches is definitely more rare. So if you were to go, say, 20 miles out, 40 miles out, you might start to see some other species of dolphins. But most likely, you would not run into some of these more pelagic species. So it's really just about the location and the shelf of the Gulf as well.

**David Todd** [00:31:37] The shelf is a little narrower, I guess as you should go further south and then wider as you go Louisiana?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:31:44] Right, and so and so we do see some of the more pelagic species like like the melon-headed whale. We see a lot of the unusual species, what we would refer to them as, coming in the Padre Island National Seashore area, more so than in Texas. So. But it's definitely relevant, we believe, to that shelf in the deep water.

**David Todd** [00:32:13] Okay. Well, I had just maybe two more questions, if you can still spare a few more minutes.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:32:20] Sure.

**David Todd** [00:32:22] One is sort of retrospective. As I understand it, the Stranding Network started informally as far back as in the 70s with Tony Amos' work and others. And here we are more than 40 years later and I'm curious if you can think about the major trends that have been seen in strandings and what they might tell us about the health of the Gulf and more particularly about the health of bottlenose dolphins.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:32:57] So I think, you know, as I mentioned, we're we're still even though we're 40 years in, that we basically started from scratch with the marine mammal data that we had. And so there's still a lot of data collection happening at this point. So we, while we have research questions, it's difficult to speculate. But as far as marine mammals are concerned, our stranding trends, we've actually seen a, you know, a number increase as far as from 1980 to now. We definitely have a higher number of strandings occurring. But like we talked about, that, that could potentially be related to the fact that people know to report them now, and an increased population.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:33:53] We are learning so much more about what these animals are dealing with as far as human interaction is concerned. So we've learned a great deal from our necropsies, where we essentially operate as a forensic team, try to document signs of human or fisheries interactions. So we've been able to gather data to look at signs of that human and fisheries interactions on animals that are dead, and we are able to collect gear and send that to a repository where they're able to examine it and learn about what specific fisheries may be affecting bottlenose dolphins and how they can work to manage those fisheries better for the animals. So that's just one example of a contribution that is widespread for, for whales, dolphins and applies all across the United States. That particularly here, particularly here in Texas, we see these animals interacting with shrimp trawlers, which is something that's unique to the bottlenose dolphins in our area. And so it's important for us to make sure that we're documenting any potential signs of that fisheries interaction with them.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:35:22] As far as biotoxin loads, we've been able to find out so much about just the occurrence of of these animals, in these animals, what what those levels look like. So there's really just been a lot of data collection happening and we're building a health database for marine mammals in Texas.

**David Todd** [00:35:49] In the interactions you mentioned with shrimping, is it a problem of bycatch and drowning in the trawl nets or what, what's the difficulty?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:36:01] Yeah, we see them get tangled in the trawl nets, and essentially drown. And typically the fisheries programs and the shrimpers are great about reporting when that happens. And so we'll respond and complete a necropsy and determine was there anything else going on with the dolphin? Or is it simply just from drowning? So.

**David Todd** [00:36:30] Is there any technical solution, sort of like the TEDs for sea turtles that would protect dolphins from whom getting ensnared in the trawl nets?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:36:42] I think the way that they become ensnared is different from turtles, and I know they're looking into, National Marine Fisheries, is looking into, you know, how how thick the line is and all the different requirements for a particular net and really just looking at how they can help mitigate that.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:37:08] Another human interaction issue that we're seeing is commercial gear. And in addition to commercial gear, I'm sorry, recreational gear interactions. So we have a few hot spots on the Texas coast that we refer to as areas where we see dolphins entangled more. And it's areas where there's higher amounts of recreational fishing happening and a great deal of discarded gear and marine debris. And you couple that with illegal feeding of dolphins and dolphins essentially learn to approach fishermen and the jetties for throwbacks. And then you've got a bad situation on your hands for the animals as they become entangled and habituated. So that's something that we're working on, doing a lot of education. We post a lot of signs at some of these more populated recreational fishing areas and really try to to spread the word about responsibly disposing of that gear, and not feeding these animals.

**David Todd** [00:38:26] Well, you know, but that's really intriguing to me because it seems like people enjoy seeing the dolphins and I guess they feed them to try to encourage that, and yet they may be putting the dolphins at risk.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:38:41] Is that right? Yes, that's a good summary. And most of the time, it's because they don't realize that these dolphins learn behaviors. So say a mom dolphin has learned to succeed at a certain fishing pier, when she has a calf, she's going to teach her calf to feed that way. And so it's disrupting their natural feeding behavior. They're losing wariness of people, that natural wariness that they have. And so I think it's just understanding that the impacts go beyond just that one instance that you're feeding them, because then they may approach someone else and not one person sees them. It's the cumulative effect.

**David Todd** [00:39:32] Something else that this conversation is making me think of, is, that like people, you know, marine mammals, and dolphins included, are at the top of the food chain. And I guess in that way are reflecting the health of of really big ecosystems. Is that something you see? I mean, do you look at these dolphins as kind of an indicator, sentinel for the health of animals that are not the dolphin itself, but the dolphin has fed on them and so reflects their health?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:40:11] Absolutely. And so bottlenose dolphins are the canary in the coal mine. They are really something we look to. And that's why we work so hard to get out to even the dead ones so that we can collect these samples, run the analyses and determine if there's any changes that happen over time that can lead us to learn more about the health of the ocean, of their habitat and when habitat protection may be needed not just for them, but also to improve our health.

**David Todd** [00:40:57] Well, maybe this is a good segue to just a last question. So as you look towards the future. You talked to us sort of about all the data you've collected over the past. But as you look towards the future, are there challenges that you foresee, or efforts that you're planning to, you know, for the network and for your own interests in dolphins?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:41:28] Certainly there are challenges and will always be challenges with, with funding. Unfortunately, more and more federal funding, federal grants, are being cut for environmental funding and so that will affect us long-term. One of our largest influx of funding is from a federal grant that we're able to receive on a yearly basis. We have to apply for it. It's extremely competitive. And so those funds continue to be cut and that will greatly impact our ability to be able to respond to these animals and to really push forward on answering some of the research questions that come after the data collection. So that's that's my primary concern is that funding will be limited and we will not be able to answer the research questions that we're forming as we collect the data.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:42:38] Additionally, we want to expand to do more with wild dolphin population research as far as our boat-based work is concerned. We feel it's incredibly important and we started working on trying to update abundance estimates so that we actually know how many dolphins exist in Texas waters so that we can understand the impact of, say, a DWH happened off the Texas coast. We might not understand the impact to the population when a hundred or two hundred dolphins die off if we don't know how many exist. And so we're working on some of that as well. And I'd like to see that full, have funding to expand so that we can determine the impacts of these anthropogenic events to the dolphins in our area.

**David Todd** [00:43:39] So you mentioned this research with wild dolphins in the Gulf or I guess in the bays, but I'm curious if you have any thoughts about dolphins in captivity. I think when you started our little conversation, you mentioned that that your introduction to dolphins was in visiting some of these marine parks. And I know that's probably a wonderful

introduction for many people. But then I've also heard folks say that that, you know, there are strains and sort of moral issues with these wild animals in captivity. And I wonder where you come down since you have had experience with both.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:44:31] Yeah. So I've had the opportunity, like I mentioned, to work with many of our rehabilitating dolphins that may unfortunately be deemed non-releasable. And it's the federal government that makes that decision. But they, some of the reasons why they may, might be deemed non-releasable is because they're too young, they haven't learned survival skills to survive in the wild on their own or potentially they have a chronic disease that will require them to be on medication for years. Long-term chronic conditions such as this or different ailments, loss of, loss of a fluke, loss of limbs, things like that, that may prevent them from surviving in the wild.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:45:20] Or so when an animal is deemed not-releasable, then the federal government goes through a very rigorous process of placing the animal, and I've been able to experience that firsthand, where they only place them in facilities that are accredited by the AZA. And then they also have to present how they will care for that particular animal's needs. Can they provide the social structure that that animal needs? Can they provide the physical needs and medication and veterinary support that that particular animal's condition requires? And so I've seen these marine parks go to extensive lengths to help animals that we have in rehabilitation.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:46:13] I think despite maybe what some of the public opinion has been, these marine parks are not necessarily seeking out animals for their parks. When we have animals in rehab, such as a young calf that we had several years ago, we couldn't find any place that would actually be willing to even take the animal, until finally SeaWorld San Antonio took him in and it was important for him to get with dolphins as quickly as possible because he was very young.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:46:47] So we see them going above and beyond to take these animals. And then I've seen them provide extraordinary care. Some of the animals that have been deemed non-releasable, that have come through our program, even back twenty-five plus years are still thriving in captivity. And I think we've seen evidence and there have been some recent publications that talk about how dolphins are actually living longer in some of these marine parks than they would in the wild. So there's a lot to consider. And really just for me that I've seen not only what those marine parks do for those non-releasable animals, but how much support they provide non-profits and other organizations like ours in rescue support and with resources to be able to do what we do.

**David Todd** [00:47:46] Well, I think we're kind of winding down here. Is there anything that you would like to add that we might not have touched on yet?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:47:57] I don't think so, I think it's it's really just amazing to me, and I think to so many, that the Texas coast being so large and the amount of animals that we see come through, that the Texas Marine Mammal Stranding Network has been able to operate on such a shoestring budget with such few staff. But yeah, we're making some of the greatest progress in our studies in the country for stranding networks. A lot of sharing our works, assessed as a model. So I think it's it's really important to really look at Texans and what they're doing to support us. You know, we wouldn't be able to do it without all these volunteers and the support that they're giving us. So that's really the main reason we've been able to operate as long as we have.

**David Todd** [00:48:55] Are there any examples of volunteers that have made big contributions that might come to mind?

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:49:05] Just right off the top of my head, I can think of several that have actually been volunteering for for more than 20 years with us. And so there are many examples, of adult, of volunteers that have given so much of their personal time, essentially working, you know, sometimes full-time hours with animals to make sure that they have what they need and they're supported. We really have some long-term volunteers that have really stuck it out.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:49:38] We also have a regional coordinator down in the Corpus Christi area - Lee Walker. She has been a volunteer, yet she has the responsibility of the regional coordinator for this Corpus Christi area where she oversees the first response and the teams. She essentially stays on call as a volunteer. So she has definitely gone above and beyond for many years working for the Stranding Network as a volunteer.

**David Todd** [00:50:16] Well, I guess that role was something that you filled for a number of years as well, being a volunteer. So thank you for your service, and thank you for your time today. I really appreciate it. You've done a wonderful job of helping me understand more about what you do and what the Network does. Thank you.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:50:35] Good, good. Excellent. Well, thank you for bringing this information to light, and look forward to seeing the final product.

**David Todd** [00:50:44] All right. Well, thank you, Heidi. You have a good day.

**Heidi Whitehead** [00:50:47] OK, thank you, David. You, too. Bye bye.

**David Todd** [00:50:49] Bye.