

All Washed Up
Ranger Jim Serpa
2005

Fore! Five, six, seven, eight, nine...
And so it started that windswept, rain-soaked January day. Ranger Brad Barker and I were patrolling on Doheny's North day-use beach examining all the debris that had come down the San Juan Creek. The debris is whisked down the creek by the raging rain runoff, eventually landing on our beach. As you might imagine, this caused quite a mess. I especially noticed all the golf balls that seemed to be everywhere. I remember asking Brad, "How many golf balls do you think there are?" To which he replied, "About 150." I said, "Well, there's only one way to find out, let's pick them up and see." We also figured that by getting them off the beach we would be keeping them from ending up back in the ocean where they would sit, and sit and sit, golf

balls not being especially biodegradable.
That day we collected 325 golf balls!

That was the start of it all. But, in the ensuing month, with the help of Ranger Chris Lozano, Interpreter Vicki Wiker and the Doheny Maintenance staff, we have collected more than 2000 balls. I can't give you the total amount because we are conducting a contest/education project. The guess that comes closest to the correct total will win a Doheny T-shirt. We constructed a display in the visitor center, with the help of Maintenance worker Larry Ponce, which has been a huge hit. People are amazed to see the large barrel filled with golf balls. This makes it easy for us to step in and explain how all the material that washes down the creek ends up in Doheny's waters and on our beaches. What a great interpretive tool!

But, lest you think golf balls are all that we saw after the storms, let me fill you in. We saw full-sized trees, including palm trees, playground balls, grass and tree clippings, buoys, pvc pipes, both small and large and plants of all kinds. We even had two snakes wash down the creek that ended up swimming in to our beach. Several large roots came ashore that Ranger Lozano and I planted in some barrels, just to see if they would grow. We have some guesses as to what they may be, with the consensus being wild cucumber or manroot. We will let you know if they eventually sprout. We also saw many fish, bird and mammal bones uncovered on the beach, probably a result of the demoic acid plankton bloom of several years ago, where we found ourselves burying sea lions by the droves. We have also seen a huge sandbar form in front of the river mouth, spawning fabulous waves for the dedicated Doheny faithful.

Jumbo squid also made an appearance one day. Lifeguard Dick Deboer discovered them. He called on the radio to inform me of several in the south end of the park. I drove down quickly to check it out. I was amazed by their size. We had three-footers come ashore a few years ago, but these were five foot and larger! We put them in the back of the lifeguard truck and drove back to the visitor center to show the others. Of course, if you know me then you know what happened next. I dissected them! I wanted to see if we could tell what they had been eating. While the others watched, I proceeded to cut each one open and examine their stomach contents. All contained the remnants of small fish. I also removed their beaks and pens. Their beaks were the size of ping-pong balls! This was quite a difference from the ones we dissect for school groups. Their beaks are the size of a kernel of corn.

Another strange visitor is a tropical lobster, *Panarilus inflatus*, caught by a commercial fisherman named Roger Heeley and donated to the aquarium. For the life of us we can't figure out how it got this far north and more importantly, how it is living in such cold water.

Possibly the coolest/saddest visitor to our aquarium was a baby thresher shark. It was a rainy afternoon when I got a call from Visitor Center Coordinator Sarah Pollak. She was calling from her other job at San Clemente Marine Safety Headquarters. She asked if I wanted a dead thresher shark. Threshers have very small teeth, but very large tails which account for half their body length. Jokingly I said, "No thanks, it's raining." Sarah exclaimed, "What?" She has known me a long time and she often lets me know about things that might be of interest. (Thanks, Sarah) Relenting, I said, "Ok", we will drive down to San Clemente and get it."

I figured I could use the jaws for an interpretive tool. As Ranger Lozano and I drove up, I saw a small (four to five foot) thrasher sitting in front of the lifeguard garage in a little pool of crimson-colored blood. To my amazement the shark flinched when I touched it. It then started to open and shut its jaws. The shark wasn't dead at all! I thought it might be badly injured and wouldn't stand a chance if we tried to put it back in the large stormy surf. Chris and I made the decision to transport the shark to Doheny and see if we could nurse it back to health.

We hustled back to Doheny with a thrashing thrasher in the back of our truck and placed it in one of our large sump tanks directly under a highly oxygenated area of the large tank. I winced as I did this because I noticed a large amount of blood seeping out of the baby shark as it sat there in the tank. I kept checking on the small shark for

the next several hours, but unfortunately, it passed away about four hours after we placed it in the tank. As luck would have it, ex-Aquarium Park Aide, (now Ventura Ranger), Brian Lane stopped by and was amazed to see this five foot shark in one of our sump tanks. After seeing that the shark had died and not wanting to waste any part of the animal, Ranger Brian Kummer brought down his filet knife and proceeded to filet up the thresher for all of us. We did save the tail and jaws for educational purposes. As he cut open the shark we noticed that it had sustained major internal injuries, probably a result of being pounded on the beach by large storm surf. Even retired Ranger Jim Long came down to collect the fins to make some shark fin soup.

Though we had the thresher for only a short time, I had somehow become attached to it and was really sad to see its life come to an end so young. I have to say though, that

not a bit was wasted and at least it died in nice clean water, not washed up on some dirty, rain drenched beach. So much for the slow off season!

P.S. Due to the publishing date of this newsletter, I can let you folks in on a little secret. The total count of golf balls found was 2,401(at this time) with the winning number at 2,314. Wow!

Jim Serpa
Doheny State

Beach

Supervising Ranger