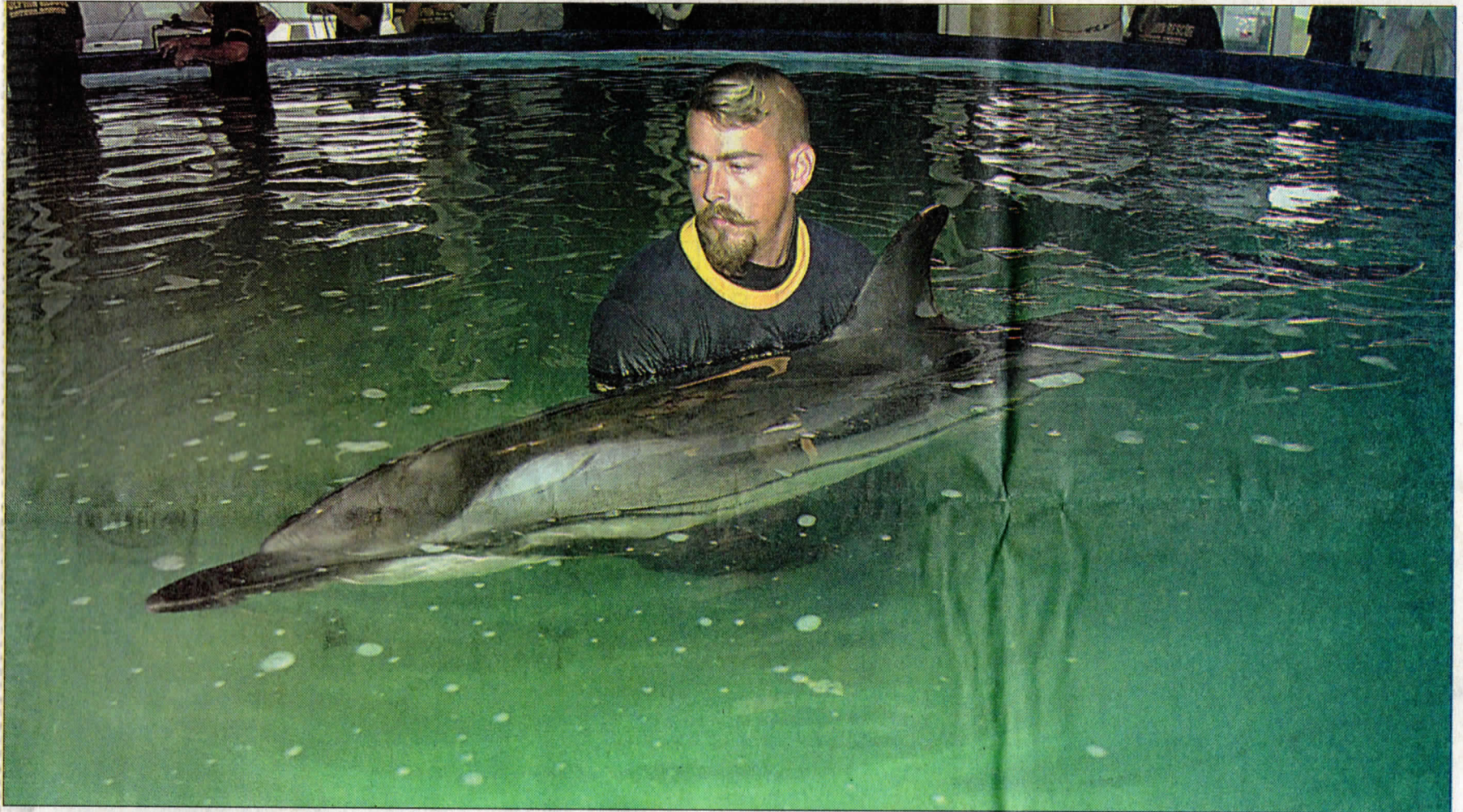


"To give you an idea of how rare this is, I haven't come across a live stranding of one of these animals once in my more than 20 years of treating marine animals."

GREGORY D. BOSSART, HARBOR BRANCH OCEANOGRAPHIC INSTITUTION RESEARCHER



ERIC HASERT/staff photographer

Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution volunteer Eric Hilterbrand holds a dolphin under examination at the facility after beaching itself near St. Augustine on Monday.

Ailing dolphin taken in at Harbor Branch

■ A Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution official said its chance of survival is not good.

By Dan McCue
of the News staff

FORT PIERCE — An ailing striped dolphin, a rare live stranding victim along the Florida coast, is the latest marine mammal receiving treatment at the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution.

"To give you an idea of how rare this is, I haven't come across a live stranding of one of these animals once in my more than 20 years of treating marine animals," said Gregory D. Bossart, director of Harbor Branch's Marine Mammal Research and Conservation program. "Unfortunately, this dolphin's prospects aren't good at

the moment and the best I can say is he's in very critical condition."

The dolphin was found Monday morning on a beach south of St. Augustine by staff from the Marineland theme park. It was brought to Harbor Branch by a rescue team dispatched by SeaWorld in Orlando.

Striped dolphins are not rare animals in the world's oceans — in fact they often travel in groups of 500 or more and in some Pacific rim countries are considered a staple food.

What makes striped dolphins such rare live stranding victims is that they prefer the deep ocean waters of the continental shelf.

For one to reach the shoreline it has to either have the strength to travel a long way or be weak enough to be carried in on the tide. A sick animal traveling several miles is more likely to fall prey to a shark or other predator than wind up in the sand.

"What we usually see as strand-



ERIC HASERT/staff photographer

ings here are animals that live much closer at hand, bottlenose dolphins, pygmy sperms whales, that kind of thing," Bossart said.

"When these animals (striped dolphins) get sick or die, they're either

eaten or stick to the bottom of the sea to be recycled."

The striped dolphin is similar to the bottlenose dolphin in many re-

Researchers are puzzled by a dolphin that shows no apparent injury but was ill enough to beach itself near St. Augustine on Monday. However, an enlarged spleen could indicate some form of cancer.

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DOLPHIN

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spects, but sleeker and more slender.

The top half of the dolphin is uniformly dark — either gray or blue — and is divided from the lighter bottom half by a prominent dark line running from eye to vent.

In adulthood they range from 6 to 8 feet long, weigh about 150 pounds and can swim at more than 30 mph.

It's for this reason and because of the "racing stripe" down their sides that they are sometimes also called "streakers."

They feed on small fish, squid and shrimp.

Since arriving at Harbor Branch and being placed in the facility's critical-care pool, however, the dolphin, described by Bossart as a young adult male, has not eaten and is being fed through a tube.

Even more frustrating for Bossart's team is its inability to determine the cause of the stranding.

"Unlike a mass stranding of dolphins, where some animals are sick and others merely confused, single strandings are animals that are usually in their death throes," Bossart said. "But in this case, I've taken every sample I can think of . . . and everything is coming back within normal ranges."

On Thursday, Bossart con-

ducted an examination of the animal's gastrointestinal tract, searching for signs of an infection preventing the dolphin from eating or of an obstruction, such as a plastic bag.

The examination failed to turn up conclusive evidence of what was wrong with the dolphin, but it did show he has an enlarged spleen, which could indicate a form of cancer.

"Unfortunately, in the majority of stranding cases, you don't really find what you're looking for until the autopsy," he said. "Sometimes we're blessed and get animals through a crisis . . . but 99 percent of the time you're really up against the natural scheme of things."