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All hail the whales

Monterey celebrates marine mammals at annual Whalefest

By Wallace Baine

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As far as we know, whales don't have calendars. So, it's no guarantee that any living whales are going to make a point to show up at the seventh annual Whalefest Monterey this weekend. But one whale will be the center of attention.

Her name is Dee, and she's a 43-foot inflatable humpback whale, making her debut at the popular outdoor event on Saturday and Sunday at and around Old Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey.

The two-day event will include both live music as well as lectures, demonstrations and reports on whales, their status and their place in the Monterey Bay Marine Sanctuary.

Dee, which is owned by the Monterey chapter of Save the Whales, is designed as an interactive activity for children and young people to get a close-up look at a whale's anatomy.

"You're able to walk around it and see some of the unique features of the humpback, and you're able to go inside of it, and see the heart, the ribs and the lungs," said Maris Sidenstecker, the cofounder of Save the Whales.

Sidenstecker said that Dee has an environmental lesson to impart as well. "We did it in order to give children and students a better concept of whales, that even though whales are really big, when they swallow plastic bags or garbage in the ocean, that all that plastic can get clogged up in the opening of their stomachs."

Dee won't be the only demonstration whale on the premises. Humphrey the Humpback Whale will be in the front of the Custom House. Also a popular part of Whalefest is the Abalone Races, which will be held each day from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. near Big Fish Grill.

Speakers scheduled to attend the Whalefest include Peggy Stap, the founding director of the Whale Entanglement Team, which helps rescue marine mammals from man-made traps of nets and plastic; historian Tim Thomas on the history of Japanese abalone fishing; Paul Michel, superintendent of the Marine Sanctuary, on the updates regarding the Sanctuary; wildlife veterinarian Dave Jessup on the health of sea otters; Ted Cheeseman on how to identify whales on whale-watching tours; and others.

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Monterey celebrates its strong connection to whales and other marine life at this weekend's Whalefest Monterey.

Musicians on hand include the Kuumbwa Honor Jazz Band, keyboardist Richard Carr, dulcimer player Mark Richardson, Nick Fettis and his "Orca-stra" and more.

There will also be activities such as squid dissection and displays such as U.S. Coast Guard's Response Boat. Dee the Whale was purchased with more than \$8,500 raised with a Go-FundMe campaign by Texas teenager Dee McMillan, who was a victim of bullying. "Humpback whales are one of the only whale species that we know of that will actually go out of their way to stop harassment from orcas on other marine species," said Sidenstecker on the link between humpbacks and bullying.

She said that after the Whalefest appearance, Dee will be taken to local schools, particularly those in non-coastal communities in the Salinas Valley to give students close-up experience with whales. "Kids can have a memorable experience and can learn how litter on the streets can end up hurting whales."