

# Arkansas State University students examine Calif. seal

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Arkansas State University students like to study things that you can not find in Arkansas.

In mid-April the students participating in the marine mammals lab offered at A-State undertook an experience not that common for people in land-locked states: the dissection of an elephant seal from California.

To be sure, this was not a large adult male of this species, which can reach 14 feet in length and 5,000 pounds of weight. This specimen was a female pup found dead on the coast of Año Nuevo, Calif.

This is a species that was saved from the brink of extinction. By the 19th century hundreds of thousands had been slaughtered for their oil. By 1892 less than 100 individuals were left, all of them off

the coast of Baja California. Conservation of this species in both Mexico and the United States has allowed its population to grow to an estimated 160,000 today.

Since many pups are found dead every year during the mating season, Arkansas State University requested the Marine Mammal Stranding Network in California to provide a carcass. That carcass was shipped frozen and then examined during the marine mammal lab course.

First, students identified the species as a northern elephant seal (*Mirounga angustirostris*). The gender was determined as a female based on the position of the external orifices. The animal was then examined for the presence of external parasites, and none were seen.

The seal, which was



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**This photo shows the students of the ASU marine mammal class that studied the elephant seal pup from California.**

found dead on Feb. 12, was then opened to examine its internal organs to try to determine the cause of death. The lack of any signs of disease and the very little content of fat under the skin led students to conclude that this animal had died of

starvation.

Every year about 2,000 pups are born on Año Nuevo. Many of them die when accidentally crushed by adult seals or simply left to starve because their mothers aban-

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doned them after leaving in search of food at sea. Many of those mothers never return after being eaten by sharks.

As tragic as this may sound, it is just part of the cycle of life. The good news is that the first elephant seals on Año Nuevo Island were sighted in 1955, and since then the population at that locality has grown to about 2,000.

Marine mammals in the United States are under special protection by the federal government under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. That law prohibits the trade of these animals for commercial purposes but allows their use for scientific and educational goals.

Arkansas State regularly receives permits to obtain marine mammal carcasses and parts given its trajectory in the use of these specimens for educational and research purposes. Some of those specimens in the past have included other seals, a porpoise, a sea otter, a polar bear and baleens from large whales.

ASU is also the only institution in Arkansas that has received authorization from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be a CITES (Convention of International Trade of Endangered Species) collection institution; that is, a scientific institution that has the permit to use and exchange for scientific purposes specimens of endangered and threatened species with the rest of the world.

For more information contact the ASU Department of Biological Sciences at [biology@astate.edu](mailto:biology@astate.edu).

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