



Alaska SeaLife Center *Press Release*

For Immediate Release: United Efforts Bring Hope to Orphaned Pacific Walrus Calf in Alaska

Seward, Alaska (August 26, 2024) —

Five organizations from around the United States have come together to provide care to an orphaned Pacific walrus calf receiving rehabilitative care at the Alaska SeaLife Center (ASLC) in Seward, Alaska, in hopes of giving her a second chance at life.

The ASLC is leading the heartfelt and intensive effort to care for the rare orphaned Pacific walrus calf that arrived from Utqiagvik, Alaska, on July 22, 2024. The young female walrus, estimated to be only a few weeks old, was found abandoned after her herd left the area. She was emaciated, dehydrated, and had small superficial wounds covering her body when the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) gave the ASLC's Wildlife Response Program approval to respond to the calf.

Since its opening in 1998, the ASLC has admitted only eleven Pacific walrus calves to its Wildlife Response Program. It is the only organization authorized to rehabilitate live stranded marine mammals in the state of Alaska, making this female calf very special.

“Caring for an orphaned walrus calf is an incredibly demanding task, requiring unwavering dedication and expertise,” said Dr. Wei Ying Wong, ASLC President and CEO. “We watch her signs of improvement with cautious optimism and are pleased to be supported by our partners in providing the best possible care for her and all our wildlife response patients.”

In the three weeks since the walrus calf's arrival, the ASLC has received support from top walrus care institutions across the U.S., including SeaWorld, Indianapolis Zoo and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium. Each organization, accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), has sent an additional staff member to assist with the calf's care. Additional AZA-accredited organizations are also assisting from afar and some, like Georgia Aquarium, are also sending additional staff members to help with 24-hour care. . This united effort highlights the power of collaboration in wildlife conservation and demonstrates the commitment of AZA-accredited institutions to preserving marine wildlife.

“We are proud to have been able to answer the call to work with our AZA colleagues to care for this precious walrus. Our amazing animal care teams are on call 24/7/365 to help ill, injured or orphaned animals in need of expert care with the goal of rehabilitation,” said Dr. Chris Dold, SeaWorld's Chief Zoological Officer.

“As one of only four North American zoos and aquariums that are home to walruses, our staff are uniquely skilled to help provide care for this calf, and we were ready to pitch in as soon as the call came in,” said Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium's General Curator Malia Somerville after they sent a member of their team to Seward, Alaska to assist with the around-the-clock care.

Walrus calves are with their mom for one to two years and are highly social. They seek comfort through physical contact with their mothers. In rehabilitation, staff act as surrogates, sitting with the calf 24/7 and providing intensive care. This habituation to human care means that this calf will not be a candidate for release, but she will serve as an important ambassador for her species, raising awareness about the challenges faced by Pacific walruses and the ecosystems they live in.

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“Animal conservation is a team effort that requires collaboration and commitment. Answering the call to help with this rescue embodies our mission of protecting nature and inspiring people to care for our world,” said Dr. Robert Shumaker, Indianapolis Zoo President and CEO.

Indianapolis Zoo is currently home to “Aku,” the Pacific walrus calf the ASLC rescued and rehabilitated in 2017. Like Aku, this current patient and any young orphaned walrus calves that are successfully rehabilitated are not candidates for release to the wild.

"Walrus are amazing ambassadors for the Arctic and an inspiration to all of us to be better stewards of the planet we all share. We are honored to have walruses in our parks, providing our guests the opportunity to learn about them and inspiring people to protect them and their habitats," said Dr. Chris Dold.

The joint efforts of ASLC and its AZA walrus care partners illustrate the dedication required to rehabilitate and care for such a precious marine mammal from the Arctic. By coming together, these organizations are giving this specific walrus calf the best possible chance at survival while also highlighting the broader significance of her species and the plight of the Arctic ecosystem as a whole.

“This one abandoned and rescued walrus calf serves as a vital ambassador for her species, the communities who rely upon them, and the arctic ecosystem. ASLC and our partners are excited to contribute to the broader effort of conserving these magnificent creatures and their ecosystems, including the rich culture and wisdom of the Alaska Native peoples, who have been here since time immemorial,” said Dr. Wei Ying Wong, ASLC President and CEO.

The walrus calf, though still in a critical state, is showing positive signs of improvement. Updates on her condition will be shared through ASLC’s Facebook and Instagram pages, as well as on the pages of the partnering organizations.

Those interested in contributing to the care of these patients can visit www.alaskasealife.org/donate.

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