



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

### **Fish and Wildlife Service**

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Patricia W. Fisher 202-208-5634  
Kathleen A. Bangert 410-573-4577

### **STRONG PUBLIC SUPPORT AND INTERAGENCY COOPERATION ENSURE SAFE RETURN OF WAYWARD ENDANGERED MANATEE**

An endangered West Indian manatee that had been roaming the waters of the upper Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries since at least July will soon return to its native Florida waters, thanks to the efforts of an interagency rescue team and a tremendous outpouring of public support.

The rescue team included marine mammal experts from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Jacksonville, Florida, and Chesapeake Bay Field Offices; the National Aquarium in Baltimore; Sea World of Florida; and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. The manatee was transported back to Florida yesterday on a C-130 aircraft provided by the U.S. Coast Guard.

"The successful rescue of this manatee is due to the teamwork of Federal and state government agencies, private organizations, and individuals who went above and beyond the call of duty to save him," said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Mollie Beattie. "I would especially like to express my gratitude to the U.S. Coast Guard for providing the aircraft and personnel to fly the manatee back to Florida."

First reported in the Susquehanna River, the marine mammal had been a regular visitor to marinas in the Chester River on Maryland's Eastern Shore since Labor Day weekend. Manatees are generally restricted to the warm, temperate waters of Florida and have difficulty surviving in waters colder than 66 degrees.

As water temperatures in the area began to drop, Service biologists became increasingly concerned about the manatee's well-being and decided its survival depended upon a quick rescue and return to warmer waters. Manatees are protected under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

"So many people came forward to help save this endangered species," said Beattie. "In addition to the dedicated work of our public servants, numerous private citizens gave of themselves by reporting sightings and providing food, equipment, and access for the rescue team. Some volunteers even spent hours in the water along with the professional members of the team. This effort is a wonderful example of the American public's strong commitment to saving endangered species."

Rescue efforts began September 23 and ended October 1 when the manatee was captured near Queenstown, Maryland. Team members provided staff, vehicles, boats, helicopters, nets, radios, and other equipment necessary for the safe capture of the manatee. More than 50 volunteers from the National Aquarium provided additional manpower. Financial support was provided by the Save the Manatee Club of Maitland, Florida.

"The citizens of Queenstown really supported the rescue effort and helped ensure its success," said Jim Valade, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Assistant Manatee Recovery Coordinator. "We're very grateful for their good will."

Biologists conducted an initial reconnaissance effort to observe the manatee's behavioral patterns and determine the best method of capture. After twice eluding rescuers, the animal was successfully recovered in Queenstown Creek and transported to the National Aquarium for monitoring. Medical tests showed the animal to be a healthy, 1,500-pound, male approximately 20-50 years of age (manatees usually live about 60 years). Today, the manatee will undergo additional monitoring at Florida's Sea World, and is to be released back into the wild tomorrow.

Aside from habitat degradation, boat propellers are a primary cause of manatee mortality. Many of the approximately 2,000 manatees left in the wild bear scars from such encounters. The National Biological Survey has cataloged scar patterns of nearly 1,000 manatees to date, which are used by biologists to identify individual manatees. However, this particular manatee had not been identified, and biologists are therefore unable to ascertain its home waters. The manatee is to be released at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge near Cape Canaveral. Because these waters are heavily used by manatees, biologists believe they should be familiar to this manatee.

The manatee is to be tagged with a satellite transmitter prior to its release. Tagging will enable the Service to monitor its health, movements, and interactions with other manatees.

Those interested in other manatee recovery efforts may contact the Save the Manatee Club, 500 N. Maitland Avenue, Suite 210, Maitland, Florida, 32751; or call toll-free 1-800-432-5645.