

# Rx for orphan walrus calf: touch, massage, cuddle, repeat

July 7 2017, by Dan Joling

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In this Wednesday, June 21, 2017, photo provided by Alaska SeaLife Center shows a walrus pup in a quarantined pen as it's cared for at the Alaska SeaLife Center, in Seward, Alaska. The pup was found on a mining barge in Nome, Alaska, and transported to the SeaLife Center, which is the only facility in Alaska that holds permits to care for stranded marine mammals. Center officials estimate the pup was two weeks old when it was found. (Jennifer Gibbins/Alaska SeaLife Center via AP)

Everybody needs a shoulder to lean on now and then. A walrus calf at

the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward, Alaska, is getting one 24 hours per day.

Trained staff members, working in pairs, are touching, massaging and cuddling a calf all day and all night as part of its recuperation. The calf, estimated to be about 6 weeks old, was found last month without its mother several miles outside Nome.

Walrus are highly social and spend two years with their mothers, said Jennifer Gibbins, marketing and communications director for the center.

"They need constant contact," Gibbins said. "Part of the caregiving is providing that constant contact and tactile interaction.

The calf was spotted in mid-June on the deck of a mining barge. The [walrus](#) was still on the barge the next morning and the barge crew summoned wildlife experts.

The SeaLife Center is dedicated to marine research and education and features a public aquarium. It's the only facility in Alaska that holds a permit for marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation.

When the calf reached Seward on June 17, it weighed 120 pounds (54 kilograms) and was extremely lethargic.

"He was severely dehydrated," Gibbins said. "That was really the first concern."

The calf initially was fed with a tube down its throat that sent food directly to the stomach. It was considered a hopeful sign when the animal began bottle feeding about a week later.

The calf now sucks down up to a liter of formula seven times per day.

As the calf rehydrated and recuperated, he became more active, curious and plump. He now weighs 143 pounds (65 kilograms).

"That's a pretty dramatic change in a short time," Gibbins said.

The cuddling is critical, Gibbins said.

"One of the unique things about walrus is that there is a very high level of maternal investment with a calf," she said. "They are with their moms for two years in the wild."

Twenty staff members have been trained to be with the little guy. He leans on them and sometimes lies on them. Sometimes he sucks their arms. Gibbins calls it nursing behavior.

"An infant human might be sucking on your fingers. That's what they're doing," she said.

Walrus have practical reasons for refined touching. They use their hundreds of short, highly sensitive whiskers to search for clams and other seafood on the ocean floor, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

A sea otter, ringed seal and two harbor seals also are receiving care. Most of the center's rehabbed animals return to the wild but the young walrus won't be.

"We can care for this [calf](#). We can take care of its health. We can give it some good social interaction. But we cannot teach that animal how to be an animal in the wild," Gibbins said. "That's why they're non-releasable."

No decision has been made on placement. The SeaLife Center will determine what facility can give it the best veterinary and social care.

"This walrus needs to be with other walrus," she said. The center expects to house the animal through summer and into the fall.

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