

# Surprise delivery: Three endangered sawfish born at SeaWorld Orlando

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*Pristis pectinata* (Aquarium of the Americas). Credit: Public Domain

An unexpected pregnancy is making history at SeaWorld Orlando. Three smalltooth sawfish pups, born this summer at the theme park, are now living backstage and providing data and mystery.

SeaWorld's aquarium is the only one in the U.S. to house the [endangered species](#) and the second one in the world to host a successful birth. The mother has lived at SeaWorld since at least 1988; she and a male are

residents of the park's Shark Encounter aquarium.

"This is a monumental event for us and for all zoos and aquariums," said Becki Orze, one of the zoological specialists of that habitat.

The pregnancy was discovered during a routine exam's ultrasound. It came out of nowhere, officials said.

"We actually, at times, speculated maybe she was too old to give birth," Orze said.

"Just the fact that she carried a pregnancy to term successfully at a minimum age of her early 30s is a fascinating piece of information that we didn't have before this event," she said. "And by we, I mean the entire sawfish nerd science community."

SeaWorld kept a lid on the births until Tuesday during annual passholder events tied to International Sawfish Day. Smalltooth sawfish have been listed on the Endangered Species Act for 20 years. These days, they are found primarily in the Bahamas, Cuba and around Florida.

There are five species of sawfish around the world, all endangered.

"It looks like a hedge trimmer on the front. It's a stingray in the middle. And it's a shark at the back end. If you mix them all together, then you get a sawfish," explained Adam Brame, sawfish recovery coordinator with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The prominent front end—aka the rostrum—typically contains between 20 and 29 unpaired teeth, he said, though they are covered in gelatin at birth, protecting the mother.

About a week before the births, SeaWorld moved the mother to its

Aquarium Health Center "so that she could give birth in a quiet and protected environment that was safe, comfortable for her and her pups," Orze said.

Mom and pups are kept isolated from one another, which is not a departure from their newborn behaviors in the wild. SeaWorld is monitoring their weight, length, diet and vital stats.

"This is why so many of us got into this career, to be able to work with people who work in the field and see those parallels between managing [wild populations](#), our free-ranging populations, and those under managed care," said Dr. Dana Lindemann, a SeaWorld Orlando veterinarian.

The pups have doubled in weight since [birth](#). Full-grown [smalltooth sawfish](#) typically grow to be about 11 to 12 feet long. (The record is 16 feet, Brame said). Their mom is a little longer than 11 feet and weighs 385 pounds.

The experts are studying why, after all these years, a pregnancy occurred.

"We're all learning every day, both in the field and in managed care," Lindemann said. "It's possible that females may be able to source for a prolonged period of time. I think four years may be the limit that we're aware of, but we just don't know."

Changes in the Shark Encounter environment, including LEDs and tank filtration, may have played roles.

"We did also bump up the temperature a few years ago, which could definitely be part of it," Orze said. "Perhaps they appreciate a little bit warmer water."

The future of the new arrivals is to be determined. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which maintains the Species Survival Plan, may pair them with [sawfish](#) born at an aquarium several years ago in the Bahamas.

"There's a lot of genetics involved, planning involved, but the goal would be an add to the genetic diversity of this group here," said Jim Kinsler, SeaWorld's lead curator of zoological operations.

The mom and offspring are not currently in a tank that can be seen by SeaWorld visitors.

"Right now at the health center, we have an environment where we can really closely monitor how much each individual is eating, which is really important because we are learning so much right now. We want to make sure that they're gaining weight and growing appropriately," Lindemann said.

A public-facing viewing will happen, eventually, Kinsler told Tuesday's audience.

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