

Miami aquarium manatees Romeo and Juliet arrive at ZooTampa for care

December 7 2023, by Max Chesnes, Tampa Bay Times



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Two Florida manatees whose living conditions at a Miami aquarium sparked online outrage have been escorted across the state by a caravan of wildlife officials to their new home at ZooTampa.

Since the late 1950s, the pair of Florida manatees have lived at Miami Seaquarium on Virginia Key. The animals, dubbed with the Shakespearean monikers of Romeo and Juliet, have been residents there for so long they predate laws created in the 1970s to help protect them.

But in recent years, [living conditions](#) at Miami Seaquarium, once home to the oldest orca in captivity, have come under fire. A U.S. Department of Agriculture inspection from July pointed to [manatee](#) isolation and a lack of shade, among other observations of mishandling animals in the aquarium's care.

Now, against the backdrop of animal advocacy groups leading a campaign for their freedom, Romeo and Juliet were delivered to their new home Tuesday at ZooTampa. Staff began the cross-state journey with Romeo's departure at 8:30 a.m. Juliet's transport left 50 minutes later.

"Today is a very big day," said Melissa Nau, the senior director of animal health at ZooTampa. "Manatees are in the hearts of so many Floridians. The fact that we get to help sick and injured animals have a chance to have a longer life is definitely a huge honor."

Romeo arrived first to ZooTampa at about 1:30 p.m., where he was met by an ecstatic (but courteously hushed) zoo staff. The roughly 4.5-hour drive from Miami included an escort, flashing lights and all, from both state and federal wildlife agencies.

"There was precious cargo coming through," said Cynthia Stringfield, a ZooTampa veterinarian who was on board with Romeo for the drive. "Romeo did extremely well during the transport. He's a very old manatee, and that was a lot for him. But he got to the zoo with no problems at all."

And then came the beloved Juliet at about 3:55 p.m.

Moving 3,000 pounds of mammal is no easy task. "As you can imagine, a manatee is quite a hefty load," Nau said. "It can be quite the challenge to move such a heavy animal."

ZooTampa has specialized stretchers to lift the manatees from their transport truck. And when it comes time to actually place them in a pool, a custom crane does the trick. Over the next 24 hours, each animal will receive a full health assessment, Nau said. That usually includes taking blood samples and potentially pain medication.

"A very intricate plan was in place for this," Nau said. "Everyone has been working together to get these animals out of their pool, into a transport vehicle and ultimately to their new home."

Their relocation to ZooTampa Tuesday was part of a larger operation that state and federal wildlife officials say had been in the works for months between the government and private care facilities across Florida. A third manatee, an adult female named Clarity, was also moved Tuesday to SeaWorld in Orlando after living at Miami Seaquarium since 2009.

Romeo and Juliet are considered "advanced age" by the federal U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, meaning their transportation to new care facilities was high risk. All three manatees likely have other health issues.

Public pressure for Miami Seaquarium to release the manatees skyrocketed in recent weeks after an advocacy group, UrgentSeas, posted a drone video from above one of the facility's pools. The video, purportedly taken Nov. 13, appears to show a lonely Romeo swimming in a small pool. The hashtag #FreeRomeo flashes at the end of the video, which had amassed nearly 23 million views on TikTok as of Tuesday

afternoon.

Phil Demers, co-founder of UrgentSeas, told the Tampa Bay Times "it's a beautiful thing" to hear the manatees are being relocated to other care facilities in Florida. He believes his organization's widespread video campaign helped make their release happen, he said.

"Public pressure played a monster role in the relocation of these manatees," Demers said in an interview. "It's every activist's dream to enact and inspire change. Today we all get to celebrate an amazing result."

Demers said Miami Seaquarium is now suing him for flying a drone over the facility.

In a prepared statement, Miami Seaquarium said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has jurisdiction over Clarity, and the agency began the process to move her to SeaWorld months ago. That would mean Juliet would be left alone, which isn't allowed under [wildlife service](#) regulations.

"Current legislation and regulations make it impossible to give a solution to keeping male and female manatees together, as reproduction is not permitted, and keeping them solitary is not recommended. And so, since no other options were available for both Romeo and Juliet, we believed it is best for them to be transferred to a facility that could host them in a social group," the aquarium wrote.

Now that these manatees are relocated to new homes, there's an opportunity for them to become figureheads of resilience—and companions for other rescued manatees in rehab, according to Patrick Rose, an aquatic biologist and executive director of Save the Manatee Club.

Most manatees in the wild don't grow to be as old as Romeo and Juliet, who have been swimming on this planet for more than six decades, Rose said. With the right care, this duo could live for many more years. But the first step was getting them out of Miami Seaquarium, he said.

"The conditions there were certainly suboptimal, and problems persisted there longer than they should have. They needed to be re-homed," Rose told the Times in an interview.

Conditions at Miami Seaquarium began to deteriorate when the Mexico-based Dolphin Company took over operations of the facility in 2021, Rose said. In August, Lolita, an orca whale who lived for decades at the Miami facility, died just months after Miami Seaquarium announced plans to relocate her back to her home waters.

Hopefully the fate of Romeo and Juliet will be better now that they have been moved to ZooTampa, Rose said.

"I have confidence in ZooTampa to provide them the care and treatment that would be optimal for them," he said.

2023 Tampa Bay Times. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Miami aquarium manatees Romeo and Juliet arrive at ZooTampa for care (2023, December 7) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-miami-aquarium-manatees-romeo-juliet.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.