

NATIONAL AQUARIUM RETURNS REHABILITATED SEAL TO SEA!

*Stranded in Bermuda, seal is the 81st animal rehabbed and released by
National Aquarium Rescue Program*

Baltimore, July 9, 2008 – National Aquarium staff were joined by volunteers on land and the United States Coast Guard by sea at the Delaware Seashore State Park to release a male harbor seal rehabilitated by the Aquarium’s Marine Animal Rescue Program (MARP). “Hamilton” was fitted with a satellite tag so Aquarium staff and the public can follow his movements on the National Aquarium’s website, aqua.org.

This seal was found stranded on a Bermuda beach in late February and taken in by the Bermuda Aquarium Museum and Zoo to be treated for emaciation and deep wounds to his neck caused by monofilament commercial fishing netting. Seals are extremely uncommon in Bermuda, and this is only the 4th seal to be stranded in Bermuda since the 1870’s.

“Bermuda has only had four seals strand in the last 130 years so it is a very surreal experience to observe a harbor seal swimming between the coral reefs and then hauling up on our pink sand beaches,” commented Dr. Ian Walker, a veterinarian and Principal Curator at the Bermuda Aquarium, Museum and Zoo who responded to the injured animal. “The seal stranded entangled in monofilament fishing net. He had an open wound 270 degrees around his neck and the only place that was not constricted was his airway. If he had continued to grow, the fishing gear would have strangled him completely,” added Dr. Walker.

While treating his neck wounds and restoring his weight, Dr. Walker understood that the seal was in need of a longer rehabilitation period and would need to be released in the US. The Bermuda Aquarium contacted the National Aquarium’s experienced Marine Animal Rescue Program to take the seal for full rehabilitation, and thanks to a generous donation by Federal Express the seal was flown to Baltimore in March.

For more than three months, the National Aquarium treated the seal for abscesses and prepared him for release. Hamilton now weighs 139 pounds and is eating 9 lbs of fish a day. The volunteers chose the name *Hamilton* after the capital city of Bermuda where he was found.

“Hamilton thrived while in rehabilitation, and we have every reason to believe that he will have a successful reintroduction back into his natural environment,” says MARP stranding coordinator Jennifer Dittmar, “We strive to return these stranded animals to the ocean as soon as they are ready, and to minimize contact while they are in our care, in order to avoid them coming to associate humans with food.”

To track Hamilton’s progress, the Aquarium fitted him with a satellite tag funded by the John H. Prescott Grant Program through NOAA Fisheries, which will transmit information about his location and speed. These tags help researchers learn more about seal migration and travel patterns.

Seal release, 2

The public is invited to follow Hamilton's progress by viewing a satellite map of his travels at the Aquarium's website at <http://www.aqua.org/trackhamilton>. Information will be gathered until the adhesive fails and the tag falls off. The National Aquarium is also currently tracking 3 sea turtles that the MARP team helped rehabilitate and release.

This is the 81st animal released by the National Aquarium. Formed in 1991 and staffed almost entirely by volunteers, the Marine Animal Rescue program has responded to hundreds of strandings, including seals, dolphins and endangered sea turtles, and to sightings of manatees, dolphins and other marine mammals.

"Marine animals are injured for a number of reasons, but most often it's the result of interaction with human activity or debris - in this case, Hamilton was severely wounded by a fishing line," commented Dittmar. "People can do their part to protect marine mammals and other species by keeping trash out of the water, never cutting fishing lines, and disposing of things properly. This does not have to happen to these animals."

The Mid-Atlantic coast is a popular destination for migrating seals. These are some things people can do to protect marine mammals and other aquatic animals in our area:

- Slow down – boat strikes are a frequent source of injuries for marine mammals and endangered sea turtles.
- Dispose of trash properly, particularly plastics and plastic bags. Marine animals can confuse trash with a food source or become entangled.
- Do not release balloons. Balloons can fall into bodies of water where animals confuse them for a food source or become entangled in them.
- Never dispose of fishing line or nets in the water.
- If a beachgoer spots a stranded animal they are required by law to keep their distance, and encouraged to call the Stranding Hotline at **1-800-628-9944** to report the animal to the Maryland Natural Resource Police.

The National Aquarium, a non-profit organization, is Maryland's most exciting and popular cultural attraction, as well as one of the region's leading conservation and education resources. For close to three decades, it has been a symbol of urban renewal, an economic anchor for the region and a source of pride for Marylanders. It has enjoyed strong, reliable attendance since opening on August 8, 1981. With original attendance projections of 650,000 visitors per year, the National Aquarium has welcomed an average annual attendance of 1.5 million over the past 10 years. Through transforming experiences, the National Aquarium inspires people to enjoy, respect, and protect the aquatic world. It is dedicated to education and conservation through more than a dozen programs that serve the environment and the community.

###