

Manatee freed after 27 years at SeaWorld

by UPI

ORLANDO, Fla. - A manatee has been released into a Florida state park after almost 27 years at SeaWorld Orlando.

The 12-foot-long marine mammal holds the record for time in captivity before release, Scott Gearhart, a SeaWorld veterinarian, told the Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel. Rita, as she was named, lost a flipper in 1982 after getting tangled in fishing gear in Brevard County.

"Every manatee that comes, it's our ultimate goal to have them released. We want to make them better and have them released," Gearhart said.

Rita was lowered into the water in a cage Thursday morning at Blue Spring State Park on the St. Johns River. The springs attract many manatees that swim up the river to spend the winter in warm water.

An 8-year-old female named Amber was released at the same time. Rita weighed in at about 3,000 pounds, Amber at 1,500.

Gearhart said that Rita will be tracked for a year to make sure she can survive in the wild after 27 years

The manatees can be followed at wildtracks.org.

Â© 2009 United Press International. All Rights Reserved.

Manatee freed after 27 years at SeaWorld by UPI