

# Sea World releases rescued gray whale

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The Coast Guard cutter leaned hard, shifting with the weight of the 10-ton gray whale as she precariously dangled over the side of the boat.

"Release the whale!" cried the crew officer. The pulley whirled as the rope rushed through. J.J. slipped from the canvas cocoon that was supported by a crane and splashed into the water Tuesday.

After 14 months at Sea World, where she was routinely fed, monitored and marveled at by tourists, J.J. must now survive on her own. She is the first gray whale raised by humans and her return to the ocean made history for marine science.

"I've been waiting for this day since she came to us," said Sea World veterinarian Thomas Reidarson. "We have learned so much and it's not over."

Just after dawn, J.J. was cradled in a specially-fitted 32-foot stretcher, supported by 20-ton cargo boom. As she was lifted out of her holding pool at Sea World, she twisted and snorted as she swung above a flat bed truck.

She was lowered into the animal transport carrier, which was padded with foam rubber for comfort.

Once snug, workers scrambled to keep her moist with misters and fans, like personal trainers preparing an athlete for a pinnacle performance.

The 12-mile ride took less than an hour. As the largest animal released into the wild, drivers were cautious not to jostle their heavy, precious cargo.

The road trip was reminiscent of the first one J.J. took just over a year ago, a journey that saved her life.

Abandoned by her mother, the days-old gray whale was found churning in the surf Jan. 11, 1997, near Marina del Rey.

She was malnourished, dehydrated, and undersized at 13 feet, 10 inches, weighing only 1,670 pounds. Her ribs showed through her skin. Her umbilical cord was still attached. She was unconscious.

"She was so limp we could just roll her over," said John Heyning, a curator of mammals at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. He was one of the first people to reach J.J. after she was reported beached.

Although scientists had never attempted raising a gray whale from infancy, Sea World spent \$1 million on the effort.

Rushed 120 miles to San Diego for emergency care, marine biologists nursed her with a simulation of mother's milk — a formula of cream, vitamins and pureed fish. After a few months, she was eating squid.

By Tuesday, she was a healthy 19,000 pounds and 31 feet long. Her daily meals at Sea World averaged 600 to 800 pounds a day.

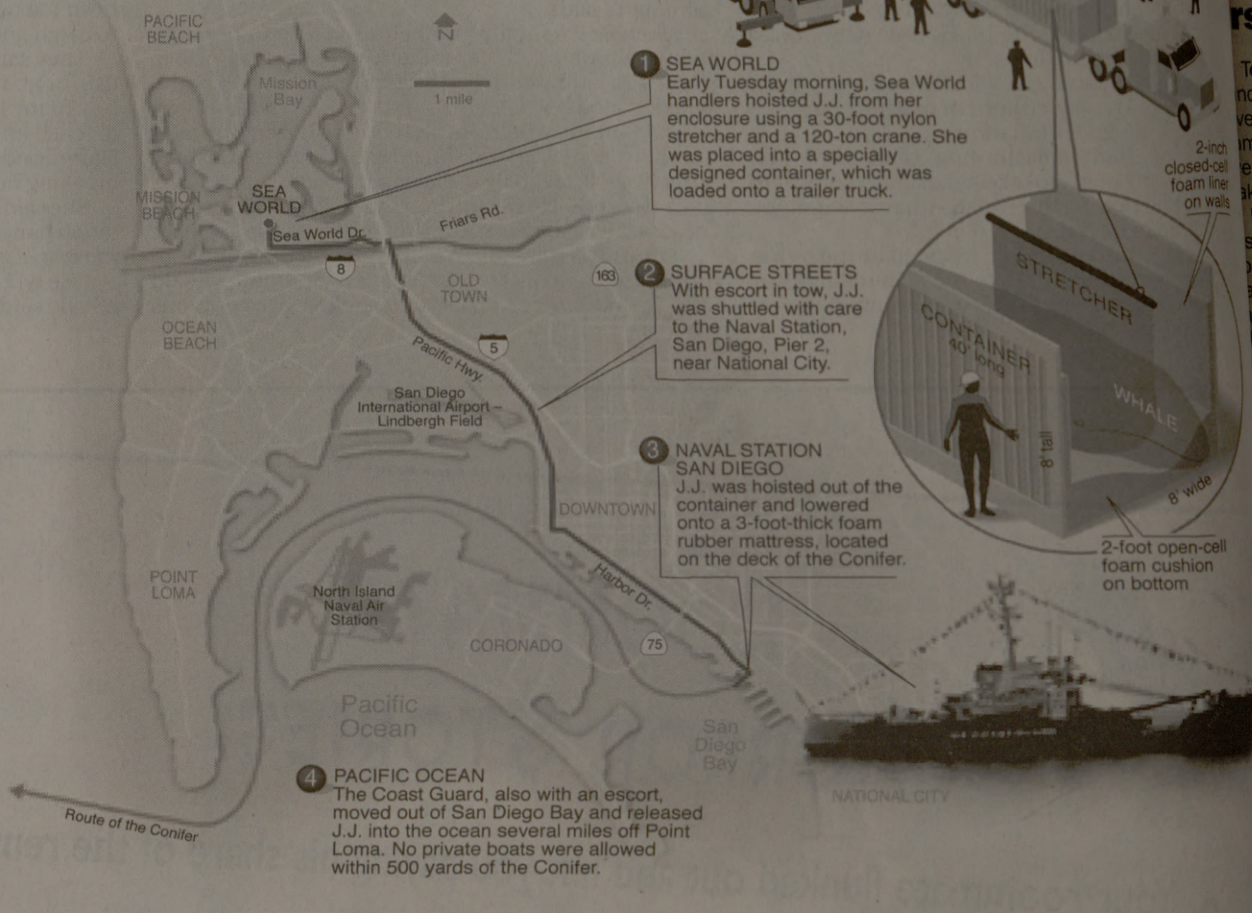
"She's probably bigger and more robust than her fellow yearlings who just survived their first winter," said Jim Sumich, a professor at San Diego's Grossmont College who has studied whales for more than 20 years. "But they may be tougher and stronger. There's a lot they learned from their mothers and their natural environment that J.J. didn't."

Once at the U.S. Naval Station Pier at San Diego Bay, the crew traveling with J.J. coaxed her onto the 180-foot buoy tender, the Conifer, hooking her stretcher to a crane usually used for loading equipment aboard warships.

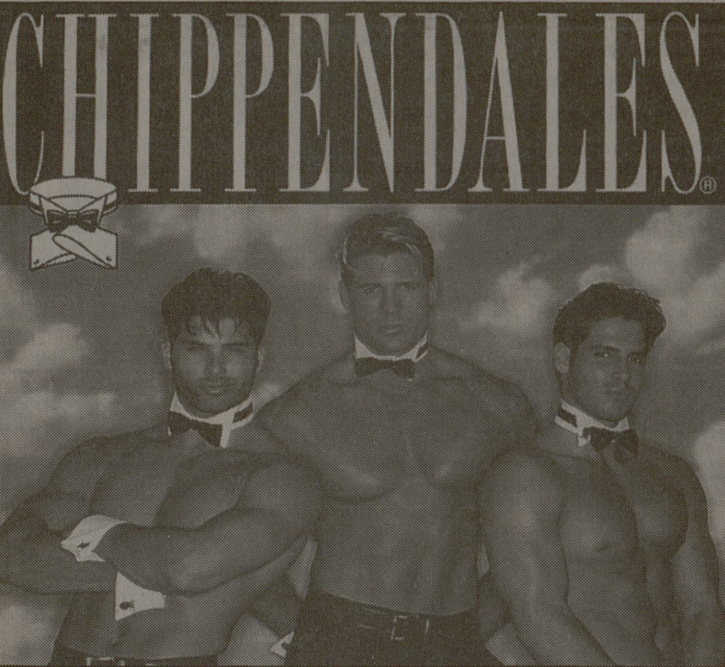
The experience was as new to J.J. as it was for the dozens who helped save her. A Pacific gray whale has never before been raised by humans and released to sea.

## J.J. goes home

It has been a remarkable journey for the newborn gray whale that washed ashore on Venice Beach, Calif., 14 months ago with her umbilical cord still attached. From the day J.J. arrived at Sea World, park staff have been preparing her to return to the ocean. The young whale was returned to the sea Tuesday, several miles off Point Loma.



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