

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 23, 2025

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Brevard Zoo Opens New Manatee Rehabilitation Center

MELBOURNE, Fla., April 2025 — Splash down! We have officially opened our brand-new Manatee Rehabilitation Center and welcomed our first two manatee patients, Churro and Randa.

Our state-of-the-art facility is designed to provide immediate care to stable, non-critical manatee patients in need of additional monitoring, weight gain or better weather conditions for release. We are incredibly proud to be able to offer our expertise and advanced veterinary care to this species, especially as our region has been at the epicenter of a historic wave of manatee deaths in recent years. Largely due to human-caused algal blooms, lagoon-dwelling manatees have lost a critical food source: seagrass. As a result, manatees in the Indian River Lagoon were dying of starvation at a record rate, leading U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to declare an Unusual Mortality Event in March 2021. While another facet of our conservation team, [Restore Our Shores](#), is working to bring back seagrass to the lagoon through pilot planting projects and the construction of two seagrass nurseries, we have also begun our manatee rehabilitation journey to help combat the crisis.

Our new facility has the capacity to care for up to six manatee patients at a time, depending on their size. The complex is also equipped with a walk-in cooler to store manatee diets, a state-of-the-art life support system to keep our pools running smoothly and a transport truck ready for any rescues and releases. There are also several cameras installed to allow our animal care team the option to monitor patients 24/7. We are grateful that this facility was made possible by a grant from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

Our Zoo is equipped with two full-time staff members dedicated to running this facility. Both Senior Conservation Manager Becca Downey and Conservation Zoologist Kylie Lawson have extensive experience working with this special species, having worked for SeaWorld Orlando's manatee rescue team and FWC respectively.

Shortly after opening, our team started caring for our first official patients! Churro and Randa were brought to us by our partners at SeaWorld Orlando. At only three years old, Churro has had a rough go. In May 2022, Churro's mom, Reckless, was struck by a large vessel shortly after giving birth to Churro. The young manatee still had part of her umbilical cord attached when the pair was found in bad condition. Both Reckless and Churro were rescued by FWC and partners and transported to SeaWorld Orlando for rehabilitation. Reckless underwent several major surgeries while at SeaWorld.

After the duo were back in good health, they were released together at Port Everglades in Fort Lauderdale where Reckless had a sighting history. Both were outfitted with satellite tracking devices by the Clearwater Marine Aquarium Research Institute so their movements and adaptation to the wild could be monitored. Churro was at an age where she would have naturally been weaned from Mom, and although the hope was that the pair would stick together for Reckless to teach Churro 'the ropes,' unfortunately, Reckless swam away from Churro immediately after their release. Members from the Manatee Rescue and Rehabilitation Partnership (MRP) monitored Churro to see how she would do on her own. It became apparent that Churro needed some other manatees around her to learn from, so she was relocated into Blue Spring State Park – a location that provides better habitat for young manatees who are not yet accustomed to the wild. Churro did well there until late 2024 when she was noted to be losing weight. MRP partners rescued Churro and assessed her health. Once it was clear Churro just needed some extra care and nutrition, the young manatee was transferred to our brand-new facility.

Our team has been caring for Churro, and she has now hit her target weight of 600 pounds! Despite Churro's tough start, she was given her name because she has the sweetest personality. We can't wait to see Churro continue to thrive under our care and eventually be released back to her natural range very soon.

Our second manatee patient was also brought to us from SeaWorld Orlando. Randa was rescued from the DeSoto Canal in January due to cold stress. Manatees affected by cold stress become very lethargic and develop white spots on their bodies. However, since being in our care, Randa has been eating well and has perked up. At only 400 pounds, Randa still has some growing to do before returning to her natural range. She will likely stay with us through the winter and into early 2026.

Randa and Churro have become inseparable since they began sharing space. Randa is more cautious, while Churro likes to lead the way. They sleep side by side every night and wake to their lettuce breakfast. Their "sibling" rivalry often kicks in as they fight over the same head of lettuce to munch on.

We are also proud to share that The Zoo's sister campus, [the future Bowen Aquarium and Conservation Center](#), will host a public-facing manatee rehabilitation center onsite to care for more critical cases.

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Brevard Zoo is home to more than 900 animals representing 195 species from all over the world. As a not-for-profit organization, it is a leader in the fields of animal wellness, education and conservation. More information is available at www.brevardzoo.org