

## Looking After Aialik

By Eileen Flory

Drowsy little Aialik bobs on his back in his pool, the corner of a diaper in his mouth. He is slowly falling asleep, so we are quiet and our movements are slow. Mammalogist Jenny Yannonne, eight and a half hours into her 12-hour otter care shift, and with more hours of her regular work to follow, hovers over him and grooms the fur on his underside. “He’s pretty independent now, but he can be uncomfortable if there’s nobody nearby,” she whispers.

Since the baby sea otter arrived at the Aquarium in mid-July, the entire animal husbandry staff has been working in shifts, tending to him 24 hours a day. They prepare his food, feed it to him, encourage him to swim and dive, groom him, watch over his naps, and relentlessly make entries in the log book. Aialik’s food intake follows a timetable of how much of what sort of food he should be getting at what week of age, but otherwise he does what comes naturally.

Right now that doesn’t seem to mean sleep, so Jenny takes the opportunity to feed him. At the poolside food station, she takes a bottle filled with formula out of an ice bucket and warms it in a hot pot, then tests it on the inside of her wrist.

Still on his back in the water, Aialik enthusiastically drinks the whole bottle down. Then Jenny brings a cupful of fingernail-sized pieces of clam and fish and, piece by piece, places the food on the otter’s chest. He picks up each morsel, and it’s down the hatch. He rolls over to wash off the crumbs.

When the food is all gone, he complains loudly, but Jenny runs back and forth along the pool’s edge, dragging a knotted towel in the water, and Aialik readily swims after it.

By now Aialik is floating noticeably lower in the water and needs a grooming session to restore his dense fur to a dry, fluffy state. Jenny arranges a layer of ice packs on a rubber mat on the concrete pool deck, spreads a towel over the ice, and sets Aialik on top. The pup squirms to dry the fur on his belly and rubs sections of his fur with his forepaws. Jenny helps with a towel.

As the sun climbs in the sky, Jenny drags Aialik’s mat to follow a spot of shade along the ground. She arranges chunks of ice around the otter and from time to time feels his back flippers. “If his flippers are warm, it’s a good indication that he is warm” she explains. “A large part of this job is making sure he doesn’t get overheated.”

Judy Tuttle, curator of mammals, hopes that one of the Aquarium’s two females will foster Aialik once he’s weaned. In the meantime, every member of the animal husbandry and life support departments has taken shifts. “There have been no dropouts,” she says, “which is a tribute to the enthusiasm of the staff.” Caretakers are instructed not to talk too much around Aialik nor to touch him except to feed him, move him or groom him. Although he’s considered unreleasable, it’s still not a good idea for him to become dependent on human company, explains Judy.

And what's it like for a fish person to watch over a mammal? Polly Rankin, curator of fishes and invertebrates, says it's been rewarding to get a lot of clear feedback in response to her efforts. "For the creatures I usually take care of, the solution to a problem tends to be technical," Polly says. "But when I'm with Aialik, we communicate in the language of mammals. His behavior communicates pretty clearly how he feels or what he needs. It's really fun to get it right!"

Back at Aialik's pool, the little otter is restless. Jenny gives him his ball, his ring, his carwash strip, his clam shell. This morning the pup concentrates on the clam shell, chewing on it and worrying it in his front paws. He fidgets around, softly grunting and snorting, and almost falls off his bed of ice packs.

Finally the little pup falls asleep, head and neck resting on a chunk of ice. Jenny accepts a pastry delivered by a co-worker and lies down on the cement next to Aialik. She won't pass up this opportunity for a rest before the next session of feeding, swimming and grooming. There are weeks more of looking after Aialik.

Sidebar:

Species: Northern sea otter, *Enhydra lutris kenyoni*

Name: Aialik (*eye-AL-ik*), which means "bad weather" in Pacific Eskimo and is the name of an Alaskan glacier

Found: Floating alone in open water near Ketchikan, Alaska

Born: About July 1, 1998

Arrived at Aquarium: July 16, 1998

Diet: Formula is made from clam, squid, half and half, vitamins and commercial mammal chow. Solid food is pieces of clam and fish.

Aialik is a fortunate little sea otter, but the Oregon Coast Aquarium is even more fortunate to have him. Alaska is a vast state and its shoreline is remote and sparsely populated, so most abandoned sea otter pups die before they are found.