

Shedd team makes quick pick of 2 whales

By William Mullen
Chicago Tribune

CHURCHILL, Manitoba—Officials of Chicago's Shedd Aquarium made a sudden decision to take home early Thursday two of the whales they captured here instead of waiting until Saturday.

Aquarium officials said the threat of a temporary restraining order to stop the aquarium at Point Defiance Zoo in Tacoma, Wash., from housing the mammals "may have had some bearing" on the surprise departure.

On Wednesday, aquarium officials had said they planned to leave on a flight Saturday afternoon.

But shortly after midnight Thursday, they decided to take the whales captured Friday and Tuesday and to release another whale caught on Saturday. That whale, which was being treated

with antibiotics for lung worms, is to be released later this week at the point where it was captured in the Churchill River.

The final results on medical tests conducted Wednesday on all three whales showed that the two to be retained were in good health, according to Dr. Jay Sweeney, the Shedd's consulting veterinarian.

Shedd spokeswoman Betsy Raymond said: "The aquarium is moving ahead the scheduled time of departure from Churchill to Tacoma. Pending litigation may have some bearing on the timing of departure."

The plane used to transport the whales will be a twin-engine prop jet cargo plane.

The two whales will be transported in specially constructed slings on the aircraft. It is a standard procedure for moving whales, dolphins and other large

marine mammals over long distances. They will be attended during the flight by Shedd handlers and Sweeney.

The mammals will be kept wet and insulated during the 3½-hour flight. When they arrive in Washington state, they will be transported to the Tacoma Aquarium. They will be placed in a pool containing the Tacoma Aquarium's three belugas.

They will remain in Tacoma for about 10 months during the construction of the beluga habitat at the Shedd's \$43 million Oceanarium opening next summer.

William Braker, director of Shedd Aquarium, said: "We have had plans to move whales on three or four alternative dates this week. The move was dependent on the health of the animals and aircraft availability. We found out today [Wednesday] that we could

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Despite its spirited thrashing in northern Manitoba's Churchill River, the first of two beluga whales destined for the Shedd Aquarium is captured Friday by a team of Canadian Inuit Indians.

Whales

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move them today, and because we could, we decided to move them to a better situation."

Braker would not comment on the litigation.

On Wednesday morning, Shedd handlers drained the 30,000-gallon temporary holding pool where the three were being kept here so they

could be given complete physical exams.

The Canadian government limits the Shedd to taking home two whales.

The Shedd had captured three whales when it appeared one of the original two was ailing.

While native whalers searched for the third whale Monday and Tuesday, Sweeney put the ailing No. 2 on antibiotics. He said she appears to have responded extremely well to the medication.

None of the whales has yet been named.

In Chicago, four people showed up with pickets Wednesday to demonstrate against the Shedd's plan at the Canadian Consulate, 310 S. Michigan Ave. They passed out flyers saying "No Jails for Whales."

David Wells, a member of the protesting group, Earth First, said transferring the whales drastically reduces their life span and hurts them emotionally by separating them from their kin.