

THE *BEAUTY* OF TRAINING: THE STORY OF GRAY BEAUTY, A RESCUED, BLIND, GRAY SEAL.



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Abstract

Gray Beauty is a wild gray seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) who was rescued in 1997 by the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation (RFMRP), which operates the New York State Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Rescue Program. Gray Beauty had several ailments, but after rehabilitation, she was left with chronic cataracts. She was eventually deemed non-releasable by the National Marine Fisheries Service. Atlantis Marine World, a new aquarium in Riverhead, New York, which houses the RFMRP, decided to provide her with a permanent home. She was to live in the seal exhibit at the entrance of the aquarium. There were many challenges to successfully relocate her. A training and husbandry program was implemented, and difficult behaviors had to be trained, such as crate training, tactile, and opening her mouth on cue. This is Gray Beauty's and her trainers' story, the challenges and the rewarding satisfaction of success in working with a rescued and blind animal.

Introduction

On April 30, 1997 the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation rescued a sub-adult, female gray seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) from a beach in East Hampton, New York. She was diagnosed with a severe respiratory infection, chronic cataracts, and she was underweight, at only 104.7 pounds. After many months of rehabilitation, her respiratory infection was cured and she was brought back to a healthy weight, but she still suffered from chronic cataracts. After further examination by Dr. John S. Sapienza, a veterinary ophthalmologist, it was determined that corrective surgery was too risky. The RFMRP nursed her back to good health and named her Gray Beauty, but it was eventually determined by the National Marine Fisheries Service in August of 2000, that she could not be released back to the wild. Atlantis Marine World, which is home to the RFMRP, decided to provide a permanent home for her. She was to be introduced into the collection of 2.2 captive born and raised harbor seals.

While with the Riverhead Foundation (RFMRP), Gray Beauty lived in a circular pool in which she swam in a counter-clockwise pattern. During rehabilitation, she ate her herring off the bottom of the pool, tearing and ripping the heads off before eating them. After being deemed non-releasable by NMFS, the Riverhead Foundation decided that it would be beneficial to start an enrichment program to help prepare her for her relocation to the seal exhibit at Atlantis Marine World. So, in October of 2000, a husbandry and training program was implemented.

In April of 2001, Gray Beauty was transported from the Riverhead Foundation's rehabilitation facility to a temporary, isolated holding pool at Atlantis Marine World. For the transport, she had not been trained to go into a crate voluntarily, so she had to be physically restrained. This was not an easy task since she was a fairly large animal. It took several people to get her into the transport crate, but she was successfully transported to the holding pool. Gray lived in this pool for several months under quarantine, and during this time we were able to move forward with the training program to prepare her for her relocation into the harbor seal exhibit.



Photo by Joe Yaulio



Photo by Joe Yaulio

Crate Training

We needed to train Gray Beauty to go into a transport crate voluntarily, to make her transport to the seal exhibit easier and less stressful. We obtained a wooden crate and modified it so that both ends had a door that could slide up and down, and we also made the handles removable to enter the exhibit more easily. We wanted to make sure that we desensitized her to as much of the crate as we could without scaring her. We were afraid to use the real crate right away, because if she got spooked and wanted to dive into the water, she might hit the sides in a panic and injure herself. Therefore, we had to find ways to mimic the crate first before using the real one.

The crate training took place at the edge of the pool, for comfort and "quick escape" if she was spooked, and we "built" the crate around her. First, using a target on a stick, we got her used to traveling over the door of the crate; we placed it flat on the ground so she could get used to the feeling of the crate under her body. Then we held up one of the doors and trained her to move past it and travel next to it so she felt the "sides" of the crate. Once she was comfortable with these two steps separately, we combined the two together so she was traveling over the "floor" and next to the "side" of the crate. Then we held up two blocking boards on either side of the door on the ground to mimic the two sides of the crate with the floor. In each of these steps we made sure that she was aware that these objects were around her by moving her head close to the objects (using a target stick), so that her whiskers touched them first. Finally we introduced Gray Beauty to the real crate. With both doors removable, we were able to enter the crate on one end with a long target pole and ask Gray to follow the target into the crate through the other end. Gray Beauty proved to be extremely brave and eventually learned to go all the way into the crate, and to back herself out of it. In the end we had her go all the way in, we shut the door behind her, and then she backed up and we closed the front door.



Photo by Chris Paparo



Photo by Chris Paparo

Relocation

One of the biggest steps of her relocation was transporting her to the seal exhibit. We were a little concerned that Gray was going to get picked on by the other seals because of her blindness. Fortunately, the pool was designed so that we were able to have a sliding gate built at one end so there was an adjoining holding pool. This allowed us to introduce Gray Beauty to the harbor seals slowly, instead of putting her in with them directly. The gate was made of steel bars so that the seals could feel, smell and hear each other, but not have full contact.

The day of transport was December 6, 2001. Gray Beauty, after a few hesitations, successfully crated voluntarily and we moved her into the holding pool of the seal exhibit. She went into the water, investigated her new pool and learned the "boundaries" with her whiskers. The harbor seals watched from the other side of the gate, but they were able to investigate each other through the steel bars. Gray Beauty ate without much hesitation a few minutes after her introduction to her new home. She was kept in this holding pool for one week, and then we decided it was time to allow her access to the main pool and the harbor seals. This was the last step in Gray Beauty's relocation. We opened the gate, and after a few minutes she eventually found that her pool had a new outlet and she swam out and started to explore. Her introduction to the harbor seals and her new home went very smoothly and all of our worries soon dissipated as we watched her investigate and navigate her surroundings without any problems.



Photo by Suzanne Johnson



Photo by Chris Paparo



Photo by Suzanne Johnson



Photo by Suzanne Johnson

Opening Her Mouth

Shortly after Gray's relocation to Atlantis Marine World, I started to train her to open her mouth. First, I started to desensitize around her nose, mouth and jaw while she was on a hand target. I used the fingers of my target hand and approximated touching her very gently. Once she was comfortable with light tactile around her mouth, I started to apply gentle pressure on her lips (an upward motion on her upper jaw, and a downward motion on her lower jaw). I spent many weeks on this step without much progress. After speaking with Martha Hiatt (Personal communication, June 2001) of the New York Aquarium, I started to target her head up higher before applying gentle pressure to her lips. The hope was that in this position she would be more likely to drop her jaw and open her mouth. After several weeks of using this method and little progress, I decided to try a different approach. I tried to capture the behavior as she opened her mouth to take a fish. I only tried this method for a short period of time. I decided against it, because I wasn't comfortable using this approach. Therefore, I went back to the approximations of targeting her head up high and using tactile desensitization around her mouth and applying slight pressure to her lips. After about nine months we finally made some progress. I was able to move Gray Beauty's lips enough to see her teeth! This renewed my motivation and I kept moving forward. But after this hurdle, Gray reminded me that she was still wild and she nipped at my fingers on several occasions. I remained focused and calm and gave no reaction when she did this. Finally just fifteen days shy of one year (from when I started the behavior), Gray Beauty relaxed her jaws and opened her mouth a tiny bit! From this point, I worked on approximating her mouth open further. She made slow but steady progress, and reminded me once again that she was still wild. After a couple more weeks of approximating her mouth open wide and strengthening the behavior, I found that it was going to be difficult to use just one hand with thumb and forefinger at a ninety degree angle to hold her mouth open. So I started to target her with one hand and use the forefinger of my other hand to make contact with her lower jaw as she opened it. This allowed me the ability to open her mouth all the way, and it gave her the tactile information she needed to hold her mouth open until bridged. Next, I started to use my forefinger on her lower jaw to desensitize her further, so I could approximate tactile up towards her teeth and gums. Once again while working on this step, she nipped at my finger. So, the next session that I worked on the tactile, before I started moving my forefinger up towards her lip and gums, I gave the verbal S² "touch" which she knows very well. This let her know that I was going to be touching in and around her mouth. These signals have worked extremely well and we have made great progress since then. Now she will allow tactile from my fingers on the outside of her teeth and gums.



Photo by Suzanne Johnson



Photo by Suzanne Johnson

Conclusion

Gray Beauty is very eager and shows much determination when learning new behaviors, and she is extremely brave considering her blindness. Much to our surprise and initial worries, she has actually established herself as the dominant animal in the seal exhibit.

Gray Beauty currently can distinguish over 35 different commands. She only knows verbal commands, which can be very challenging for the trainers. We have to make sure that each one sounds different. We also say her name before each command to make it less confusing for her if she is being fed near the other seals. She will follow a target almost anywhere in the exhibit. She gates almost always without fail, and will swim to a rock station in the center of the pool on her own, and waits there for her trainer. She nods her head yes and shakes it no, claps her pectoral flippers while in a ventral position, splashes wildly in the water, spins, rolls, circles, blows bubbles, waves both flippers, and does a "shame" with one flipper over her nose. Gray hauls out on the beach for a ventral and dorsal layout, both of which she allows second person tactile. She is currently learning to blow a kiss, and to retrieve a ball while she is in the holding pool.

Gray Beauty has been through many challenges in her life, but she continues to persevere with amazing strength and courage. She is a wonderful animal to work with and she continues to be an inspiration to all of her trainers and many of Atlantis Marine World's visitors.

References

Stevens, Michele M. (2004). Strategies for Changing Cues for Visually Impaired Phocids. Proceedings of the Animal Behavior Management Alliance.

Special Thanks and Acknowledgements

Joe Yaulio, Chris Paparo, Susanne Johnson, Katrina Zawacki, Jennifer Parizo, the Animal Care Staff at AMW, the staff at RFMRP, Dr. Robert Pisciotta DVM, and Dr. John S. Sapienza.