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KODIAK, Alaska – The 250 pound seal, named Diamond, is release back into the wild. USCG photo by PA3 Richard Brahm.

## ALASKA SEALIFE CENTER, COAST GUARD RETURN RESCUED SEAL TO WILD

By PA3 Richard Brahm

KODIAK, Alaska – The Coast Guard and the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward joined forces on November 16, 2007, to return a rehabilitated ribbon seal to the wild.

The 250 pound seal, named Diamond, was transported aboard a Kodiak based Coast Guard HC-130 Hercules airplane from Kenai to Cold Bay where she was successfully released.

Diamond was found last August approximately one-half mile inland at the Palmer Hayflats State Game Refuge, well outside her natural environment. The seal was transported to Seward and rehabilitated at the SeaLife Center.

“The Rescue Rehabilitation and Stranding Program rescues 30 to 40 animals a year from all over the state of Alaska,” said Tim Lebling, Alaska SeaLife Center coordinator. “Our goal is to allow them to stay wild and healthy, so while they are in rehabilitation we don’t treat them like the other captive animals at the center.”

Although the SeaLife Center was successful in its rehabilitation of Diamond, returning the seal to her natural environment would take coordination with another agency that has a long history of helping marine mammals.

The Coast Guard’s history of protecting marine mammals in Alaska began in the early 1870s when the first Revenue Cutters were dispatched to the region to protect fur seal rookeries. Today the Coast Guard’s dedication to marine stewardship continues through observation missions of seal and walrus rookeries and unique mission like those with Diamond.

“The Coast Guard does regular maritime patrols to protect and monitor seal rookery areas and to ensure that fishing vessels are adhering to the no-transit and no-fish zones,” Lt. Steve Bonn, Air Station Kodiak public affairs officer explained. “This is done so the seal’s breeding grounds aren’t disturbed.”

As part of their stewardship mission the Hercules landed at the Kenai Airport and safely loaded Diamond. She was accompanied by Lebling and another animal care specialist who was aboard to help and comfort Diamond on the flight to her new home. The mission was possible as the Coast Guard was already flying to Cold Bay on a regularly scheduled mission, and no commercial transport was available.

After several hours of transport, Diamond arrived at the edge of the Bering Sea in Cold Bay. Diamond was transferred onto an awaiting truck, the final ride of her long journey home. Although human interaction during her rehabilitation was kept to a minimum, dozens of individuals from the local community turned out to see her off.

Diamond’s cage was carefully lowered near the waters edge and opened. She slowly waddled her way down into the frigid water that would be her new home. Diamond stayed at the waters edge for a few minutes, looking back a few times at all the people, before swimming off into the darkness. Although Lebling was saddened to see Diamond go, there was an added benefit that would allow him to keep a connection with the animal he had grown to love.

“She has a satellite tag on her and that will allow us to track her for a prolonged period of time,” Lebling explained. “We will learn a little bit more about where these animals go. The tag will remain on Diamond until she molts in June or July.”

As for the Coast Guard’s role in returning Diamond to the wild, Lebling noted that the Coast Guard’s help was vital to returning Diamond to the wild successfully.

Even though Diamond is one of an unknown number of ribbon seals, the effort of rehabilitation has a lasting impact on the environment and protecting the environment for future generations.

“Moving this ribbon seal helps maintain the species,” Bonn explained. “Whether it’s one or 1,000, it helps prevent that species from winding up on the endangered species list and maintains equilibrium in the cycle of marine life.”

Diamond’s location will be updated monthly on the Alaska SeaLife Center website under the rehabilitation section. [www.alaskasealife.org](http://www.alaskasealife.org)