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Pregnant Beluga whale, Aurora, due to give birth

24 hr Beluga Observer program driven by volunteers

VANCOUVER, BC – Veterinary and marine mammal care staff and volunteers at the Vancouver Aquarium are making final preparations for the imminent birth of Beluga whale Aurora's calf during the final days of her pregnancy.

A 24-hour Beluga Observer program comprised of 190 volunteers from throughout the community provides an amazing opportunity to learn about marine life. Trained by Vancouver Aquarium marine mammal experts, Beluga Observer volunteers make a vital contribution to monitoring Aurora's well being. Volunteers are trained to observe and record data in a number of important behavioural areas such as: decrease in appetite, increase in dominant behaviour with other belugas, normal bodily functions, rate of respiration, and signs of contractions. Volunteers are likely to be first to see signs of labour such as water breaking and the tail flukes of the unborn calf.

Some Beluga Observer volunteers are recruited from the Aquarium's existing pool of nearly 900 active volunteers; others via the Aquarium's membership; and still others through additional public outreach. They are youth, seniors, university students, couples and families. Some travel from Vancouver Island to cover overnight Beluga Observer shifts.

Volunteers are needed for "beluga watch" round the clock. They work in teams covering 4.5 hour shifts using hand-held radios, stop-watches and phones. 2-3 volunteers are in place at any given time now as the birth may happen at any time.

Pat Chapman, Vancouver resident and volunteer Beluga observer shares her experience. "Aurora is starting to lay down the law a little bit with the other belugas, Qila and Tiqa (pronounced: KEE-lah and TEE-kah)," says Chapman. "We've observed some slightly more dominant behaviour from Aurora as she enters the final days of her pregnancy. Tiqa is only 1 year old and is always looking for a playmate as any youngster will do. It's incredibly interesting to watch Aurora and Tiqa interact these days. Aurora will be logging (resting at surface) and Tiqa will kind of sneak up on her, get really close and then just stare at her. One night we observed this behaviour and saw Aurora snap her jaw in response to Tiqa!"

Pat Chapman became a Vancouver Aquarium volunteer in 2002. She has volunteered over 4600 hours of service in 6 years including overnight shifts in 2008 as Qila prepared to give birth to Tiqa. In 2008, Pat was awarded Volunteer of the Year by the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Filming/Covering the Birth

An advisory will be distributed to media as soon as the Vancouver Aquarium determines Aurora is in labour. Media will have the opportunity to film and provide live coverage during the birth.

About the Vancouver Aquarium

The Vancouver Aquarium is a self-supporting, non-profit association dedicated to effecting

the conservation of aquatic life through display and interpretation, conservation practices, education, research, and direct action. Learn more at www.vanaqua.org

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