

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**East Coast Zoological Foundation Welcomes Two New Manatee Patients**

MELBOURNE, Fla., January 13, 2026 — East Coast Zoological Foundation (ECZF) welcomed two manatees to the organization's behind-the-scenes rehabilitation center at Brevard Zoo earlier this month.

The two patients, males Andme and Tugboat, arrived from Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens.

"Our Manatee Rehabilitation Center was ready to receive manatees in need of housing and care – and we're thrilled to welcome Andme and Tugboat to their new home for as long as needed," said Ashley Rearden, Director of Conservation for the Foundation.

Both of these manatee patients suffered major injuries in recent years. Andme, who is estimated to be about 10 years old and 1,000 pounds, came under human care in 2020 after being rescued for a boat strike in Bonita Springs, Lee County.

Tugboat, who is estimated to be about 6 years old and over 1,200 pounds, has been under human care since 2024. He was rescued due to watercraft-related injuries in Tarpon Springs, Pinellas County.

"Andme and Tugboat are powerful ambassadors for their species," Ashley said. "Their stories show the importance of safe boating practices in areas populated by manatees. From following posted speed zones to checking for manatees breaking the surface of the water, we can all do our part in protecting this iconic Florida species."

Their injuries have led them to have buoyancy issues, making it necessary for these two patients to receive specialized care and be housed in shallow pools. While at ECZF's Manatee Rehabilitation Center, the duo will receive a steady diet of romaine lettuce and regular checkups with the Zoo's veterinary care team.

ECZF's Manatee Rehabilitation Center opened in April 2025 with the goal to provide immediate care to stable, non-critical manatee patients in need of additional monitoring, weight gain or better weather conditions for release. ECZF staff recently completed initial upgrades to the facility's life support system and hopes to eventually advance the facility to accommodate manatee patients in need of critical care as well.

ECZF is proud to be able to offer our expertise and advanced veterinary care to this species, especially as this region has been at the epicenter of a historic wave of manatee deaths in recent years. Brevard Zoo is a member of the [Manatee Rescue and Rehabilitation Partnership \(MRP\)](#), which is made up of 24 organizations working together to rescue, rehabilitate and return manatees to their natural range.

Largely due to human-caused algal blooms, lagoon-dwelling manatees have lost a critical food source: seagrass. As a result, manatees in the Indian River Lagoon were dying of starvation at a record rate, leading U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to declare an Unusual Mortality Event in March 2021.

"We want to offer a comprehensive solution to supporting this species," Ashley said. "In addition to offering manatees in need a home, ECZF is also working to bring back seagrass in the lagoon through the work of our Restore Our Shores team. Their work and that of our partners will help restore the lagoon for the good of manatees and people alike."

If you should see a sick, injured or distressed manatee, please call FWC's Wildlife Alert Toll-Free Number: 1-888-404-3922.

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### **About East Coast Zoological Foundation**

Driven by a mission to answer the call, East Coast Zoological Foundation (ECZF) is focused on educating, engaging and empowering the community to take action for conservation. The 501c(3) nonprofit located in Melbourne, Fla., includes Brevard Zoo and Bowen Aquarium campuses. ECZF works directly with Florida species and the community to develop programs and workshops to make a difference locally and around the world. From sea turtle rehabilitations and releases, building living shorelines along the Indian River Lagoon, providing scholarships and grants to the community and more, the Foundation creates opportunities for guests to connect with nature and make an impact in conservation and education. Founded in 1986, ECZF is governed by a volunteer board of directors and receives no recurring operating funds from any city, county or state government, relying on donations from people and companies to continue answering the

call for wildlife and the environment along Florida's Space Coast and beyond. To learn more, visit [OurLegacyCampaign.org](http://OurLegacyCampaign.org).