

Recent Observations and Management of a West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) off Bimini, Bahamas

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Abstract:

West Indian manatees (*Trichechus manatus*) are uncommon in the Bahamas, including in Bimini where only three sightings have been reported in the last century. The close proximity of the Bahamas to the United States necessitates cooperation on many issues, including the management of protected or listed marine mammals. An adult male manatee was observed and monitored from 28 November 2008 to 24 January 2009, enabling us to present details on this rare occurrence and the subsequent bi-national management of this errant individual. TBH-02 “Harold” (aka “Kodi”) was radio tagged with an Argos-linked GPS tag and monitored for 41 days. Observations and photo documentation revealed the animal to be in good body condition. Despite five distinctive scar patterns, no match to previously photo-cataloged Florida or Bahamian manatees was possible. Frequent daily GPS tag location fixes were associated with local resources including foraging and resting areas within the North Bimini harbor, and periodic trips to seagrass beds and canals of South Bimini. Despite his frequent visits to specific sites, adequate freshwater sources for drinking could not be identified. His tolerance for human presence, multiple propeller markings, close proximity to peninsular Florida, and preliminary genetic analyses strongly suggested an association with the Florida subspecies *Trichechus manatus latirostris*. Based on evidence of a Florida origin, the rare occurrence of manatees in Bimini and an apparent absence of conspecifics and reliable natural fresh water, the Bahamas

Department of Marine Resources and US Fish and Wildlife Service arranged capture and transport to Florida. The US Coast Guard, Miami Seaquarium and local volunteers conducted the capture and transport. Assessed to be in good health, after a brief rehabilitation, he was radio tagged and released in Crystal River, Florida. This process marks successful marine mammal stranding cooperation between individuals, private businesses and government agencies in two countries.