

Arkansas State University students prepare manatee exhibit

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

JONESBORO — For a land-locked state like Arkansas, it is unusual to hear that a manatee has arrived to The Natural State, but that is exactly what happened a couple of weeks ago.

Arkansas State University sought a manatee for the purposes of teaching, research and outreach, and it received a complete skeleton from Florida. The animal is a female and 132 inches long. It weighed more than 1,300 pounds when it died.

This manatee was found dead and severely decomposed on a beach next to a canal in Sarasota Bay, Manatee County, Fla., in July 2004. Biologists of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission determined the cause of death was watercraft collision. The propeller made severe scars all over its body.

Boat collision is by far the most common cause of death among manatees in Florida, a state that has severe restrictions on boat speed that are not always followed.

Manatees are very large animals that normally reach about 135 inches, so the one now at Arkansas State University is a full adult. In the Western Hemisphere this species receives the

common name of Florida or West Indies manatee. The largest population is found in Florida, but during the summer months it can swim as far north as Virginia and as far west as Louisiana. This species is also found in many countries of the Caribbean and as far south as

northeastern Brazil.

Historically this species had been exploited. Because of changes in its coastal habitats, its population has been reduced considerably and is now considered "vulnerable" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and "en-

dangered" by the United States government. Since this species is protected by the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act, ASU had to request a special permit from the federal government to obtain the skeleton and keep it on its premises.

The skeleton was re-

ceived unarticulated, and it has been the job of ASU biology graduate student Tracy Klotz to mount it. This is the first time a manatee skeleton has been mounted in the Mid-South. Klotz used pictures and drawings from a variety of resources to figure out how the nearly

200 bones of this animal go together.

Biologists at ASU will use the skeleton for teaching purposes in the several zoological courses they offer, for future research that compares features among different species of marine mammals and for outreach programs.

One of those programs will be to exhibit the skeleton in The Hall of Science in the Lab Sciences East building on the ASU Jonesboro campus. The skeleton will be hung from the ceiling and a mural will be painted to serve as a background for the skeleton.

The mural will be done by ASU Art student Amber Heard. She will use pictures from the natural environment of the Florida manatee to recreate its habitat. The exhibit will include an electronic portrait that will reveal information on this animal in the form of a slide show.

This exhibit, like the rest at The Hall of Science, is open to the public, and admission is free.

For more information, contact the ASU Department of Biological Sciences at biology@astate.edu.

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Arkansas State University's Tracy Klotz completes the mounting of a Florida manatee in the mammalogy lab.