

No tanks: Sharks get liberated

Trio was raised
in a pizza parlor

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KEY LARGO — After three controversial years on display in California pizza parlors, a trio of Caribbean nurse sharks is back in familiar waters.

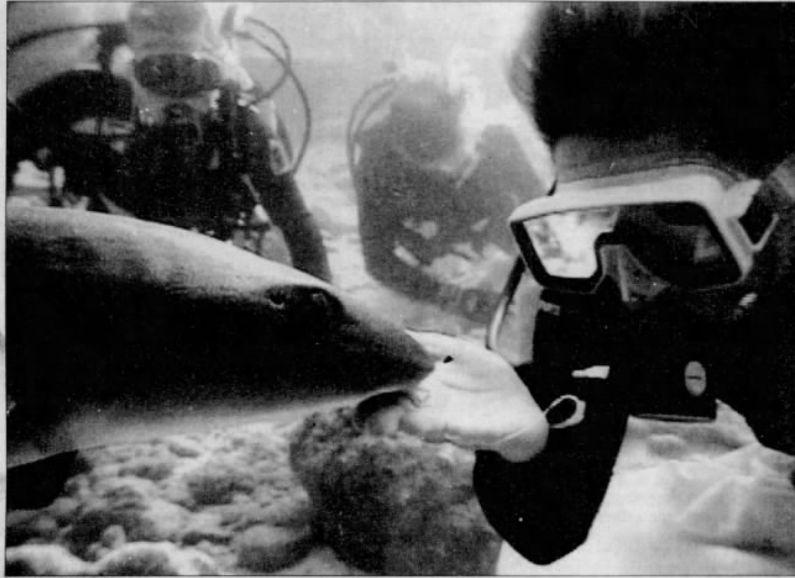
Michaela, a three-foot female nurse shark, and Dale and Freedom, both three-foot males, were released early Sunday in waters off Key Largo.

Officials from Marine Mammal Conservancy and Education and Action for Animals spearheaded the effort in freeing the bottom-dwelling sharks, which had grown up in under-size fish tanks at Pizza A Go Go, a restaurant chain in San Jose, Calif.

Wendy Rhodes, president of Education and Action for Animals, said public pressure forced the restaurant owner to give up the sharks, which he legally bought as pups from a tropical fish dealer several years ago.

Despite their growth over the years, the sharks were being kept in small tanks that were unkept, Rhodes said. While it took some convincing, the restaurant owner eventually concluded that his pets were more than he could handle.

"Basically, he got himself into a jam and couldn't get out of it, so we came to the rescue," said Rhodes, whose organization has released six captive nurse sharks this year. "Many people don't tend to realize that this



NEW HOME: Divers escort three sharks down to City of Washington, a wreck in John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park.

little creature they think is cute for their fish tanks can live for 40 years and grow to 14 feet. Nobody can accommodate a shark like that. It's cruel to think otherwise."

Returning the sharks to their ocean home was no small undertaking. Storage containers equipped with sea water, battery-powered air pumps and temperature-control gauges were constructed for the cross-country flight from San Francisco to Miami. Once transported to a pen in Key Largo, the sharks were slowly acclimated to the Atlantic Ocean and moved through the water by volunteers.

Rhodes said the sharks needed help swimming after years of living in a tank.

A donated boat from Key Largo-based Atlantis Dive Center delivered the sharks to their final destination in John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. Divers escorted the trio down to City of Washington, a wreck well known for its nurse sharks, and left some food to get them started.

Rhodes said volunteers will check on the sharks weekly to assist in their transition.

Rick Trout, a rescuer for Marine Mammal Conservancy, said he hopes

the release will serve as a lesson to marine enthusiasts, particularly those with an appetite for unique fish collections.

"Some people take these guys from the ocean, try to profit from them and then wash their hands of it all, not caring what happens to the animal," Trout said. "Sometimes it puts people in a position where they have to entertain less-than-humane options when the animal has gotten too big or too much to care for. If the sharks stayed in the sea where they belong, no one — especially the sharks — will have a problem."