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Sumatran tiger makes a splashy debut at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

Malosi is now on exhibit for public viewing at the Asian Forest Sanctuary

Tacoma, Wash. – Three-year-old Malosi didn't take long to win the hearts of children and adults when he made his public debut at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium this morning.

He sauntered into a water-and-forest habitat, leapt onto a huge rock and devoured a frozen meat-and-whipped cream treat to celebrate his first appearance before zoo visitors.

Malosi wowed them. There were oohs and ahs when his treat fell into the water and he went after it, his powerful leg muscles propelling him as he swam.

No matter that it was pouring rain in the Asian Forest Sanctuary. Onlookers were captivated by the 261-pound Sumatran tiger, one of only 74 in North American zoos and 378 in zoos around the world.

As Malosi went into the water, grabbed a large blue boomer ball in his paws and headed into the trees to play with it, senior staff biologist Paul Povey kept a running commentary about the big cat, his history and his importance in a Sumatran tiger breeding program.

"In a zoo situation, tigers have a pretty good shot at making it about 20 years," Povey told visitors in answer to a question about how long they live. "Average lifespan out in the wild for a tiger is eight to 10 years," he added.

But for as much fun as it is to view Malosi at play, the tiger's "got a big job to do" at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, Povey said.

Malosi came to Point Defiance about a month ago from Honolulu Zoo to breed with Jaya, the zoo's female tiger and mother of the two tiger cubs born in 2010. Malosi – whose name means strong and powerful in Samoan - has not yet fathered a litter of cubs.

The pair has met through a "howdy panel" designed to get them acquainted without physical contact. That's gone well, Povey said. "Everything that we see so far is really good."

Malosi has been pretty laid back, while Jaya has been more restive, behavior keepers expect in this situation, he added.

When the time is right, the two will be put together in a mating ritual that could potentially produce offspring later this year, Povey said.

“We’re very excited about Malosi’s arrival and the pair’s potential to produce cubs,” said general curator Karen Goodrowe Beck. “The Sumatran tiger is critically endangered and we are working hard to protect and boost the population of this extraordinary species.”

Goodrowe Beck coordinates the North American Sumatran tiger Species Survival Plan® as part of a global effort to ensure the long-term sustainability and health of zoo-based tigers by creating the best possible breeding pairs.

With Malosi, Point Defiance Zoo now has four Sumatran tigers. Jaya and her year-and-half old cub, Bima, and his father, Bali, also are in residence.

This tiger sub-species is native to the Indonesian island of Sumatra. But poaching and habitat loss have caused the wild tiger population to dwindle to approximately 300. Breeding tigers helps sustain the zoo-based population, raise awareness about the plight of tigers in the wild and engage the public in conserving tigers in the wild.

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest’s only combined zoo and aquarium, promotes responsible stewardship of the world’s resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The zoo, a division of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).