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Aged polar bear euthanized at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

27-year-old Kenneth suffered major paralysis of his right side

Tacoma, Wash. — Kenneth, the oldest of four polar bears at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, was euthanized this afternoon after he suffered a sudden major paralysis of his right side that left him unable to walk or stand.

Senior staff biologists discovered on Monday that Kenneth was having mobility problems. He demonstrated some improvement after treatment, zoo veterinarian Dr. Holly Reed said. On followup exam on Tuesday, no skeletal damage or broken bones were discovered. Potential neurological damage was suspected, Dr. Reed added.

Kenneth lost function in his right front leg and that, combined with severe arthritis in his right rear leg, left him effectively paralyzed on that side, Dr. Reed said.

After monitoring Kenneth's condition through the night, veterinarians and zoo staff made the decision to euthanize the 27-year-old, 870-pound polar bear, who has lived at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium since Nov. 19, 2002.

Kenneth was born in the wild in Canada, according to zoo records. At 27, he was approaching the upper age for polar bears living in zoos, Dr. Reed said. Polar bears rarely live to 20 years old in the wild.

"We focus on quality of life with these bears," Dr. Reed said. Euthanasia was the humane decision in a situation "where he was basically paralyzed on his right side without indications of recovery," she added.

Kenneth's nerve damage appeared to be profound, Dr. Reed said. She praised staff for their observant and compassionate care of Kenneth during several difficult days.

Kenneth and another of the zoo's polar bears, Boris, came to Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium 10 years ago after federal officials seized them from a traveling Mexican circus in Puerto Rico. They were among six polar bears the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service confiscated at the time. All were in extremely poor health and living in cramped conditions.

In addition to Boris, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium has two other polar bears, Blizzard and Glacier.

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only combined zoo & 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).