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Ten-year-old girl's idea sparks zoo's new holiday light recycling initiative

Ten-year-old Jessica Lam of Federal Way approached Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium staff last spring with an idea to keep thousands of strings of holiday lights out of the landfill and raise money for the zoo. Her idea sparked the zoo's new holiday lights recycling program, which zoo leaders will kick off on Friday (Nov. 28) as part of Zoolights, the zoo's annual holiday lights festival.

Jessica and zoo leaders hope families will bring their old holiday lights to the zoo when they come to Zoolights instead of throwing them in the trash. Their goal is to collect 10,000 strings of holiday lights between now and early January.

"If every family who comes to Zoolights this year brings one string of holiday lights, we'll reach our goal," said zoo operations manager Stan Chapin. More than 90,000 people attended the month-long holiday lights festival last year.

Chapin said the holiday lights recycling program began as a small internal zoo project and within days had evolved into a large public recycling initiative as people got excited about keeping holiday lights out of the landfill and raising money for the zoo's conservation activities.

"Jessica inspired us to think bigger," said Chapin. If the recycling project is successful this year, Chapin said zoo staff hope to turn it into an annual event.

Individuals can drop off their old holiday lights at designated bins at the zoo's main entrance and other Metro Parks Tacoma locations, including the Metro Parks Tacoma headquarters building, Tacoma Nature Center, and all Metro Parks Community and Neighborhood Resource Centers.

Jessica and zoo staff then will load up the donated lights and deliver them to a local recycling center. Money raised from the sale of the lights will go into the zoo's conservation fund, which supports conservation efforts for species in the zoo's collection as well as onsite green initiatives.

Jessica, whose favorite animals are polar bears and sea otters, said she was excited to help the zoo. "I like helping animals and the environment," she said.

To learn more about Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium's holiday lights recycling program, visit www.pdza.org/zoolights.

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Editor's note: Jessica Lam and her mother, Danette Lam, are available for interviews.

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium promotes responsible stewardship of the world's resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The zoo, a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums.