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TWO GREEN SEA TURTLES SPLASH DOWN AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM

Sunny and Azul will live behind-the-scenes while they get to know the aquarists who will care for them – and while their new Pacific Seas Aquarium home is completed

TACOMA, Wash. – Two gorgeous Pacific green sea turtles are swimming in waters at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium for the first time in the zoo's 112-year history.

The zoo's news residents, a pair of 14-year-old brothers named Sunny and Azul, won't meet the public just yet. They need time to get to know the aquatic animal biologists who will care for them and train them to come to feeding stations for their diet of romaine lettuce, other vegetables and tidbits of fish.

"This is a happy, celebratory day for us," Zoo Deputy Director John Houck said on the turtles' arrival late Tuesday. "They are magnificent animals, and this is one more milestone in our progress toward opening the wondrous Pacific Seas Aquarium next summer."

While construction continues on their new home, Sunny and Azul are swimming in a 5,000 gallon temporary home situated in a special aquatic animal care area equipped with sophisticated instrumentation to ensure the saltwater, drawn from Puget Sound, is kept at optimal temperature, salinity and pH levels for them.

The brothers, who will join scalloped hammerhead sharks and spotted eagle rays in the aquarium's massive 250,000-gallon Baja Bay habitat, appear healthy and began eagerly eating shortly after their arrival, Head Veterinarian Dr. Karen Wolf said.

Aquatic Animal Curator Neil Allen, Senior Staff biologist Marc Duncan and aquarists Melissa Bishop and John Foster welcomed Sunny and Azul to their new home late Tuesday night on their arrival from SeaWorld San Diego. The two turtles were hatched there in 2003.

Bishop will take the lead in caring for the enthralling animals. She grew to know and love them several years ago while she was an assistant aquarist at Monterey Bay Aquarium, Sunny and Azul lived there for a time.

They made a lasting impression.

"I couldn't know then that I would ever be reunited with them, but I always hoped it might one day happen," Bishop said. "I am beyond thrilled that we can provide a home for them in the Pacific Seas Aquarium."

"There is something about sea turtles, in particular, that draws people to them," she added. "They have engaging personalities, and visitors will stand and watch them swim for long periods of time. They are graceful. And they're very curious."

The brothers were hand-raised and have spent their lives as representatives of their endangered species, both at SeaWorld and Monterey Bay Aquarium. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service does not consider them releasable to the wild.

Sunny and Azul are mere teenagers in the sea turtle world. Green sea turtles can live for more than 80 years. And they generally don't reach sexual maturity until they're about 20.

As aquarists get to know them, they will enrich the turtles' diets. Besides lettuce, Sunny and Azul will eat bell peppers, spinach and a variety of other plants. In addition, they may get frozen treats like ice blocks studded with vegetables.

Turns out that just like humans, sea turtles enjoy back scratches, Bishop said. The two turtles like a gentle scratching of their shells, either with an aquarist's fingers or a soft-bristled brush. The activity also helps maintain the integrity of the turtles' shells.

Sunny, who weighs about 100 pounds, is very laid back and loves those back scratches, Bishop said. Azul, who weighs about 20 pounds less than his brother, "is more reserved, a bit more hesitant around people," she added.

Both turtles like to have some objects in their pool under which they can hide and use for scratching their backs.

Green sea turtles get their name from the distinctive green layer of tissue under their shells.

Sea turtles generally aren't considered social animals, usually congregating only to mate and lay eggs. They often can be found floating at the surface of the sea, or sunbathing on rock ledges. They are air-breathing reptiles but can hold their breath for up to five hours while resting underwater, slowing their heart rate to one beat per nine minutes to conserve oxygen.

While Sunny and Azul await completion of their new home, Bishop and other aquarists will train them to come to specific "stations" for feeding. That routine will transfer over to Baja Bay, a habitat representing the diverse marine life of the Gulf of California. Feeding them in this way ensures that each gets his correct amount of food each day. Sea turtles can eat about 1 ½ percent of their body weight daily.

The \$51.6 million, 35,000-square-foot Pacific Seas Aquarium will replace the now 54-year-old North Pacific Aquarium at the zoo.

Scalloped hammerhead sharks, spotted eagle rays and a variety of warm-water species of reef fish will share Baja Bay with the two sea turtles. Together, these exciting species will stretch the reach of the new aquarium, which will take visitors on a journey of exploration from the cold waters of the Northwest to the temperate seas of Mexico, and across the ocean to the shores of Japan and other Pacific Rim nations.

Sea turtles are endangered in the wild, and zoo staff will talk to visitors about the perils the species faces in the world's ocean – from being struck by boats to getting caught up in fishermen's nets to becoming entangled in the increasing types and amount of plastic trash that chokes the world's seas. Sea turtles also are poached for their meat and eggs.

Tacoma residents already are playing a role in saving endangered sea turtles by saying "no" to single-use plastic bags, Houck pointed out. The city's Bring Your Own Bag ordinance took effect in July. Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, along with other aquariums across the U.S., is a leader in educating the public about the harm that all kinds of plastic, from bags to can rings to straws, can do to marine life, including sea turtles.

"We know visitors will be inspired by these animals," Conservation Engagement Manager Karen Povey said of Sunny and Azul. "And before they leave the aquarium, we will ask our guests to make a personal pledge to take action on behalf of healthy oceans and the animals that live in the seas."

Bishop thinks the brothers will make that job an easy one for many years to come.

"Kids who come to see and appreciate these turtles when the new aquarium opens next year will be bringing their grandchildren to see them one day," she said.

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

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