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ENDANGERED SPECIES, SCULPTED IN SAND

It's back! Incredibly popular last year, a sand sculpture is rising again at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium this summer – this time featuring the Zoo's endangered species, with local artists and sand play stations.

TACOMA, Wash. – It's a jungle, rainforest and ocean all rolled into one – and it's made of sand.

An elephant, tiger, anoa, green sea turtle, scalloped hammerhead shark and more have been slowly carved out of sand in "Species in the Sand," a sand sculpture on the Zoo's grassy lawn that kicked off mid-May and will last all summer. Led by international sand artist and Tacoma native Sue McGrew, the sculpture celebrates all the endangered species that call Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium home.

Sculpting began, appropriately enough, on May 17, World Endangered Species Day, and is now complete.

"We have a large number of critically endangered species in our care at Point Defiance Zoo that we are working to protect for future generations," explains Wendy Spaulding, conservation engagement curator. "We hope that seeing these precious species all together in one of Sue's amazing sculptures will inspire guests to join us in taking action on behalf of endangered wildlife, big and small."

McGrew, sought after around the world for her sculptures, is joined by local sculptor Jeff Strong and California sand artist Abe Waterman, with some extra volunteer help.

"I'm so excited about coming back," says McGrew. "I had such a blast last year, talking to people and sharing the joys of sculpting sand."

But it's not just the artists who get to play with sand. As with last year's Pacific Seas Aquarium-themed sculpture, sand play stations with sculpting tools are available every weekend through summer for Zoo guests to try out.

Since the sculpture features so many species from different parts of the world – not to mention sizes – McGrew is creating a dreamlike, stylized design. On the land side, the central focus is an Asian elephant surrounded by anoas, tigers and even an axolotl, a small feathery amphibian. On the ocean side, a swirling wave contains warm-water species like a green sea turtle and scalloped hammerhead shark (viewable in the Pacific Seas Aquarium), plus sea otters, puffins on rocks and even a golden poison arrow frog, magnified in size.

A map near the sculpture lists all the species, and shows where to find them in the Zoo.

In total, the Zoo is home to 18 endangered animal and 5 endangered plant species, plus many more that are listed as threatened or vulnerable. It is a national leader in Species Survival Plan breeding programs for clouded leopards, Malayan tapirs and Sumatran tigers, runs conservation engagement programs from keeper chats to local preschool, elementary, and high school science, and supports many conservation projects to protect endangered species in the wild through the Dr. Holly Reed Wildlife Conservation Fund.

Guests can discover ways to help endangered species on the Zoo's Take Action webpage: pdza.org/take-action.

The sculpting process begins with wetting and compacting the sand into blocks, then carving designs from the top down. Rainy weather doesn't stop the sculpting – in fact, it helps. When it's done, McGrew's team coats it with a thin layer of diluted glue to protect it from rain marks.

"Seeing it evolve from construction site to sculpture is pretty cool," McGrew says. "Sometimes the parents want to stay longer than the kids!"

It's this fascination with sand, says McGrew, that makes it so ideal for telling stories – like how endangered species urgently need our help.

"You say sand, people think 'beach,'" she says. "But our entire civilization is built on sand: our buildings, roads, glass, technology. It's an incredible resource that we turn into other things. It becomes so strong, yet we play with it on the beach as kids. It has this magical quality people can really relate to."

For more information, see www.pdza.org/sand-species.

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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. A member of the Metro Parks Tacoma family, the zoo creates a legacy of sustainability for future generations through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities; it also embodies Metro Parks' mission of creating healthy opportunities to play, learn and grow. The zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).

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