



POINT DEFIANCE ZOO ELEPHANTS TEST POSITIVE FOR TUBERCULOSIS

Animal care team focused on quality of life for Hanako and Suki

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TACOMA, Wash. – Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium’s two elderly elephants, Hanako and Suki, have tested positive for tuberculosis, zoo officials announced today.

The zoo’s elephants are not showing any signs of illness, but the animal care team continues to monitor them closely, according to head veterinarian Dr. Karen Wolf.

“Both elephants continue to eat well and spend time in their outdoor habitat every day,” said Dr. Wolf. “At ages 56 and 55, Hanako and Suki are geriatric elephants with multiple health challenges. So intensive, long-term TB treatment is not the best medical approach for them.”

The median life expectancy for a female Asian elephant in human care is about 47 years.

These test results were not unexpected. The tests on the animals were initiated in September after some staff members who work extensively with and around the elephants tested positive for a latent, or inactive, form of TB that is not contagious.

“In anticipation of these results, we adopted additional safety protocols in our elephant area at that time based on recommendations from public health authorities,” said zoo Director Alan Varsik. “Keeping our staff, animals and the public safe continues to be our top priority. Now that we have these test results, our animal care team is assessing next steps for these beloved animals.”

Intensive TB treatment would make the elephants feel very ill because of the side effects of the medications and would compromise their health and quality of life, said Dr. Wolf. “Also, if they feel ill and choose not to take their medicine for several days, it could lead to a drug-resistant form of TB,” she added. “We are focused on providing the highest quality of care for Hanako and Suki.”

Point Defiance Zoo annually tests both elephants by collecting fluid from their trunks and sending it to a certified laboratory for testing as part of a comprehensive health program. The testing meets standards of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. TB has been reported in elephants as far back as 1875 and occurs in elephants in the wild and in zoos.

Zoo officials are working with public health authorities as they continue to investigate. No active human cases of TB have been found.

“Throughout the investigation, we have followed the safety recommendations of state and local public health authorities to ensure the welfare of our animals and the safety of our staff and guests. We continue to consult with occupational health and safety experts on current safety protocols for our staff,” said Varsik.

For more information about tuberculosis, visit the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department web page at <https://www.tpchd.org/healthy-people/diseases/tuberculosis-tb>.

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