



POINT DEFIANCE ZOO, NORTHWEST TREK CERTIFIED AS SENSORY-INCLUSIVE ZOOS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 1, 2022

TACOMA/EATONVILLE, Wash.— For the fourth consecutive year, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium in Tacoma, Wash. and Northwest Trek Wildlife Park in Eatonville, Wash. are certified as sensory-inclusive venues by a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing understanding, acceptance, and inclusion for people with sensory needs.

“We want every guest to feel welcome and comfortable throughout their visit,” said Alan Varsik, director of Point Defiance Zoo and Northwest Trek. “Becoming sensory-inclusive helps us engage with everyone in our community and awaken a connection to wildlife.”

In 2019, the two sister zoos were among the first venues in Washington to become sensory-certified through KultureCity. Today, eight venues in the state are sensory-certified through the Alabama based organization. Overall, KultureCity has certified over 120 zoos and aquariums in four countries.

The zoos’ partnership with KultureCity includes ongoing staff training on how to recognize and support guests who may be experiencing sensory overload; identifying clearly marked Quiet Zones; and providing helpful tools to ensure guests feel comfortable during their zoo visit. Backpack-style sensory bags for guests include items like noise-canceling headphones, fidget tools, verbal cue cards, and weighted lap pads.

Crowded, noise-filled areas can make it difficult for someone without these kinds of aids to feel comfortable. Bright lights, certain smells and other stimuli can also trigger discomfort in individuals with sensory-processing difficulties.

“Individuals with sensory needs want to enjoy zoos, aquariums, and wildlife parks with their families and friends but often have to leave because the environment is something they cannot adapt to,” said Uma Srivastava, KultureCity’s Executive Director. “Sensory inclusion training and support ensures that community destinations, like Point Defiance Zoo and Northwest Trek, are prepared to welcome everyone with special needs.”

One in six individuals in the United States has a sensory need or an invisible disability, according to

Srivastava. Children and adults with sensory needs can include those with autism, Down syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder, ADHD, cystic fibrosis, dementia and Parkinson's disease.

At Point Defiance Zoo, guests can check out a sensory-inclusive bag at the front gate. Learn more [here](#).

At Northwest Trek, guests can borrow a sensory-inclusive bag at the front ticket window. Learn more [here](#).

A New Sensory Garden for Little Explorers

Children with sensory needs may also want to explore the colors, smells and textures in the brand-new sensory garden, which opened at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium April 1.

In the new [Little Explorers Nature Play Garden](#), young guests will **see** bright gold sunflowers, dusky blue lavender and sage, and dottings of pink, violet, scarlet and vermillion. Torch lilies tower over delicate asters. Guests can **touch** fuzzy yarrow, spiky aloe, stiff grasses and soft leaves. They can **hear** seedpods rattle and bees hum, or **smell** smoky sage, sweet mint and sun-warmed lavender.

"We hope to inspire our youngest guests to use their senses and experience the plant world in a totally new way," said Wendy Spaulding, the zoo's conservation engagement curator.

Sensory gardens benefit people of all ages and sensory abilities. They help those with limited sight appreciate nature to the fullest and offer everyone the chance to learn how people with different abilities experience the world.

See Wildlife from the Comfort of your Car

At Northwest Trek Wildlife Park, guests can experience the awe and wonder of seeing a moose, caribou, mountain goats, swans, elk and deer from the comfort of their own car during a [Wild Drive](#). Guests can tune into the radio so they can hear the naturalist leading the tour talk in real time about the native Northwest species they are seeing up close as they drive by. This is an opportunity for everyone to be included in wildlife, regardless of their abilities.

Both zoos, the Little Explorers Nature Play Garden, and the Wild Drive are all ADA accessible.

###

Media Contacts:

Whitney DalBalcon, 253-278-6343 or whitney.dalbalcon@pdza.org

Tessa Miller, 253-331-5858 or tessa.miller@pdza.org