



## INTRODUCING TWIN POLAR BEAR CUBS ASTRA AND LAERKE

*Two-year-old sisters to make their public debut June 15 at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** June 5, 2023

TACOMA, Wash. – Astra and Laerke, two polar bear cubs who have captivated much of the country since their births two years ago at the Detroit Zoo, arrived at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium Friday evening. The twin sisters are settling into their new Tacoma home and will make their public debut Thursday, June 15.

“These exceptional bears have captured the hearts of millions of people across the country with their heartwarming stories,” said Malia Somerville, interim general curator for Point Defiance Zoo. “We are delighted to warmly welcome them to the Pacific Northwest and excited to introduce them to our community.”

Twin sisters Astra and Laerke (pronounced LAIR-keh) lived apart for over two years. Just two days after her birth in Nov. 2020, Laerke had a medical emergency that left her weak and in need of constant, lifesaving care from her care team. While Astra continued to live with her mother, Laerke was raised in human care and then spent several months sharing a habitat with Jebbie, an orphaned grizzly bear. Earlier this spring, Astra and Laerke were successfully reintroduced and are now inseparable.

“Both bears are smart, high-energy bears who love to splash, pounce and play together in the water,” said Point Defiance Zoo assistant curator Sheriden Ploof. “Astra is confident, independent and inquisitive while Laerke is more cautious and gentle.” Ploof and three other polar bear caregivers traveled to Detroit to meet the young bears and learn about their personalities, favorite foods and daily routines.

Point Defiance Zoo has been home to polar bears for more than 80 years, and the zoo’s animal care and veterinary teams have decades of experience caring for polar bears. Blizzard, the zoo’s last remaining polar bear, was diagnosed with liver cancer and humanely euthanized in May 2022. Since then, the zoo has been making improvements to the Arctic Tundra habitat to prepare for the bears’ arrival.

“We’ve replaced rockwork with soft sand so it’s paw-friendly, and we’ve added a tall log structure so Astra and Laerke can practice their climbing skills,” said Ploof. “And we expect both bears to spend many happy hours playing and swimming in their deep saltwater pool.”

At more than two years old, Astra and Laerke would be living on their own in the wild, away from their mother, so the move to Tacoma is natural and necessary for their continued development. Association of Zoos & Aquariums polar bear population experts recommended the bears’ move to Tacoma to support the sustainability of a healthy, genetically diverse and demographically varied polar bear population.

Polar bears are classified as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature’s Species Survival Commission has designated the species as facing a high risk of global extinction.

Polar bears need sea ice to survive, but the seasonal sea ice they depend on is shrinking due to climate warming, said Somerville. “Our polar bears have always inspired our community to take action in their own lives to reduce their carbon footprint and help protect polar bears in the wild.”

Point Defiance Zoo is a leader in polar bear research and conservation, working with Polar Bears International and other partners to help study and protect polar bears in the Arctic. As a certified Arctic Ambassador Center through Polar Bears International, the zoo supported a “Burr on Fur” study to test bear-friendly ways to attach tracking devices to help scientists study the movement patterns of wild bears. Additionally, zoo staff partnered with University of Washington scientists to study the rate of hair growth in zoo bears to evaluate stress levels, contaminant exposure and nutritional needs in wild polar bears.

Astra and Laerke moved to Point Defiance Zoo with authorization from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s Division of Management Authority.

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