



POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM IS ACCREDITED FOR ANOTHER FIVE YEARS FOLLOWING RIGOROUS REVIEW BY ASSOCIATION OF ZOOS & AQUARIUMS

Tacoma zoo also wins significant achievement award for volunteer dive program

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TACOMA, Wash. – Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium earned kudos and another five years of accreditation from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) in September. The Tacoma zoo also won a significant achievement award in volunteer engagement for its volunteer dive program.

“We know that Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium is well-regarded by guests, who return again and again,” said Andrea Smith, president of the Metro Parks Tacoma Board of Commissioners. “Our community can take great pride in knowing that our local zoo and aquarium is among the best in the country and a national leader in animal care, education and wildlife conservation.”

“AZA’s standards are continuously revised to reflect cutting-edge zoological practices based on the latest animal wellbeing science and research,” said Dan Ashe, president and CEO of AZA. “The ability to earn AZA accreditation is a significant accomplishment not many achieve and is a testament to these facilities’ dedication to the animals in their care.”

Accreditation by the national association means the zoo and aquarium has passed intensive inspection in every aspect of its operations, from animal care and education to conservation and guest experiences. The inspection team that visited Point Defiance Zoo in June highlighted several noteworthy achievements in the following key areas:

- Animal care and well-being are top priorities, as demonstrated by strong animal assessment, animal enrichment and health care training programs to enhance animal well-being. The inspectors said elderly elephant Suki “receives exemplary care, provided by a compassionate, competent and caring team of dedicated caretakers.”
- The inspectors said the animal ambassador program is “robust and well-developed” and the animal show is a “great example of demonstrating to the public the level of care provided to animals” at AZA-accredited zoos.
- Inspectors highlighted the zoo’s “impressive” commitment to saving critically endangered red wolves through the Red Wolf Recovery Program. They also noted the zoo’s active participation in local and global conservation projects, from rockfish population surveys and bull kelp recovery in Puget Sound to tiger and elephant conservation projects in Asia.
- The inspectors praised the award-winning Wildlife Champions partnership with two Tacoma public elementary schools and the “innovative” hands-on learning opportunities for Tacoma students attending the Science and Math Institute (SAMi) high school on zoo grounds.

- Finally, the inspectors highlighted the “friendly and welcoming” staff and their “passion and commitment to the work they do.”

AZA’s rigorous accreditation process includes a detailed application and meticulous on-site, multiple-day inspection by an independent team of trained zoo and aquarium professionals. The inspecting team observes all aspects of the operations, including animal care and well-being; keeper training; safety for guests, staff, and animals; educational programs; conservation efforts; veterinary programs; financial stability; risk management; and guest services. Finally, the accreditation commission interviews top zoo and aquarium officials at a formal hearing. AZA facilities must complete this intensive accreditation process every five years as a condition of Association membership.

“AZA accreditation is the gold standard among zoos and aquariums,” said Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium Director Alan Varsik. “This glowing report reflects the exceptional work our dedicated staff do every day to awaken deep connections in our community to nature and wildlife.”

Varsik also praised the staff and volunteers who participate in the zoo’s successful volunteer dive program, which garnered a significant achievement award. The national AZA award recognizes Point Defiance Zoo for effectively engaging volunteers in the overall mission and operation of the organization.

“Our exceptional team of volunteer divers plays a vital role in helping us to provide the highest quality of care to our animals, connect our community to nature, and protect critical species and habitats in Puget Sound,” said Varsik. “I am continually inspired by their dedication and passion for our mission.”

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