

PRESS RELEASE

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Zoo wins top national conservation award for 25-year, regional turtle recovery project

SEATTLE—Woodland Park Zoo has received top honors in the North American Conservation Award category for the *Recovering Western Pond Turtles in Washington State: A 25-year Team Effort* program, along with partner Oregon Zoo. The national conservation award was presented over the weekend from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) at its annual conference held this year in San Diego.



See a new video on the turtle recovery project at: <https://youtu.be/AjCU0oXChG8>.

“Woodland Park Zoo and Oregon Zoo are leaders in protecting North American wildlife,” said Keith Winsten, director of Brevard Zoo and chair of AZA’s Honors and Awards Committee. “Conservation is a high priority for Woodland Park Zoo and Oregon Zoo, as well as for all AZA-accredited aquariums and zoos, and this award provides well-deserved national recognition to the teams at Woodland Park Zoo and Oregon Zoo for their leadership and commitment to protecting Western pond turtles and our natural heritage through the *Recovering Western Pond Turtles in Washington State: A 25-year Team Effort* program.”

The Western pond turtle once ranged from Washington’s Puget Sound lowlands, southward through Western Oregon and California to Baja California. With only 150 turtles remaining in the state of Washington, these last remaining individuals struggled for survival as they battled predation by the non-native bullfrog, disease and habitat degradation. In 1991, Woodland Park Zoo and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife established the Western Pond Turtle Recovery Project to help recover the Western pond turtle, including initiating a head start and release-to-the-wild program. In 1999, Oregon Zoo joined the recovery team and over the years other nonprofits, government agencies and private partners have contributed to the multi-institutional conservation project.

As the state’s longest-running species reintroduction project, self-sustaining populations have been re-established in two regions of the state: Puget Sound and the Columbia River Gorge. More than 2,100 turtles have been head started and released through the [Western Pond Turtle Recovery Project](#). While surveys indicate that nearly 1,000 of the released turtles have survived and continue to thrive at six sites, challenges still lie ahead for recovery of this species.

“As the only indigenous, freshwater turtle in the Puget Sound lowlands, the Western pond turtle is an important ambassador for prairie wetland. If not for the collaborative efforts by Woodland Park Zoo, Oregon Zoo, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to help recover the endangered species, the state would have forever lost this precious turtle and critical sentinel for the health of our region’s ecosystem,” said Woodland Park Zoo President and CEO Alejandro Grajal, PhD. “Their long-term commitment to recovery may be slow as a turtle, but they’re still here and surviving.”

Additionally, the Western pond turtle is one of 10 signature species that AZA-accredited facilities are working to protect through a bold effort focused on saving species from extinction and restoring them in their natural ranges. AZA SAFE: Saving Animals From Extinction combines the power of engaging 183 million annual AZA-accredited zoo and aquarium visitors with the collective expertise of these facilities and their conservation partners to save species such as the Western pond turtle. SAFE also provides a unique platform for AZA-accredited aquariums and zoos to increase the impact of their field conservation efforts and conservation contributions. To learn more, visit AZAsavingspecies.org.

About AZA

Founded in 1924, the Association of Zoos & Aquariums is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, animal welfare, education, science, and recreation. AZA is the accrediting body for the top zoos and aquariums in the United States and eight other countries. Look for the AZA accreditation logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things. The AZA is a leader in saving species and your link to helping animals all over the world. To learn more, visit www.aza.org.

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