

PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

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Editor note: For directions to the protected site in Lakewood, contact the zoo's PR staff **by August 10**. The release site is not publicized in order to protect the sensitive habitat.

Native endangered turtles to be released to the wild Aug. 11 ***26 years of recovery help boost local population***

WHAT: In 1991, the state of Washington nearly lost its only native turtle, the Western pond turtle, to extinction. Only a mere 150 Western pond turtles remained in two populations in the state. The press is invited **Friday, August 11**, to a protected recovery site where Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Woodland Park Zoo will release approximately 60 juvenile turtles.

Returning the turtles to the wild is part of the collaborative [Western Pond Turtle Recovery Project](#), the state's longest-running species reintroduction project. Thanks to these collaborative recovery efforts over the last 26 years, more than 1,000 native turtles thrive at protected sites.

Under the recovery project, the turtles were collected from the wild as eggs and given a head start on life under the care of Woodland Park Zoo to improve their chance of survival in the wild. Unlike wild turtles, they are fed at the zoo throughout the winter so that by summer they are nearly as big as 3-year-old turtles that grew up in the wild. Once the turtles reach about 2 ounces—a suitable size to escape the mouths of invasive predatory bullfrogs—they are returned to the wild and monitored by biologists.

WHEN/ **WHERE:** **Friday, August 11, 10:00-11:00 a.m.:** The turtles will be released at a recovery site in Lakewood, Wash. For directions, contact the zoo's PR staff **by August 10**. The release site is not publicized in order to protect the sensitive habitat.

VISUALS: Zoo staff, ZooCorps teens and special guests releasing the turtles in the ponds.

INFO: The [Western pond turtle](#) once ranged from Washington's Puget Sound lowlands, southward through Western Oregon and California to Baja California. By 1990, their numbers plummeted to only about 150 Western pond turtles in two populations in the state of Washington. These last remaining individuals struggled for survival as they battled predation by the non-native bullfrog, disease and habitat loss. A respiratory disease threatened the remaining turtles and evidence could not be found that any hatchlings were surviving.

In 1993, the state listed the Western pond turtle as endangered.

In 1991, Woodland Park Zoo and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) joined forces to recover Western pond turtles by initiating a head start 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.

In 26 years, 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, and surveys indicate that



more than 1,000 of the released turtles have survived and continue to thrive at six sites.

Each spring, WDFW biologists go in the field to attach transmitters to adult female Western pond turtles. They monitor the turtles every couple hours during the nesting season to locate nesting sites and they protect the nests from predators with wire enclosure cages. A portion of the eggs and hatchlings are collected and transported to Woodland Park and Oregon Zoos where they can grow in safety.

While slowly making its way toward recovery, the Western pond turtle population still faces threats such as the loss of suitable habitat, invasive bullfrog predation and disease. Over the last several years, an emergent disease, [ulcerative shell disease](#), has affected about 30% of the wild turtles. Known to cause lesions in a turtle's shell, severe cases can lead to lowered fitness, paralysis, low birth rate and even death.

Woodland Park Zoo and Oregon Zoo are working with WDFW and other partners to address this urgent situation: studying the disease, treating severely diseased turtles, and providing overwinter care for turtles to allow their shells to heal before they are released back into the wild. After the treated turtles are released, WDFW monitors the turtles to determine if they remain healthy and are able to reproduce normally in the wild.

The Western pond turtle is among 10 species being focused on through the [Association of Zoos & Aquariums' \(AZA\) SAFE](#) (Saving Animals From Extinction), which focuses on the collective expertise within AZA's accredited institutions and leverages their massive audiences to save species. AZA and its members are convening scientists and stakeholders to identify the threats, develop action plans, raise new resources and engage the public. AZA SAFE harnesses the collective power of all AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums and invites the public to join the effort.

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