

PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

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Editor note: For directions to the protected site in Lakewood, contact the zoo's PR staff **by August 9**. The release site is not publicized in order to protect the sensitive habitat.

Endangered turtles being released to the wild August 10 ***Local population continues to thrive under 27-year recovery project***



WHAT: The press is invited **Friday, August 10**, to a protected recovery site where Woodland Park Zoo and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife will release approximately 40 juvenile Western pond turtles.

Returning the turtles to the wild is part of the collaborative [Western Pond Turtle Recovery Project](#), Washington state's longest-running species reintroduction project. Thanks to these collaborative recovery efforts over the last 27 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 10, 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 9**. 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 living 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 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 1993, the state listed the Western pond turtle as endangered.

In 27 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 few 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 Zoo and Oregon Zoo where they can grow in safety.

Over the last several years, an emerging shell disease affecting 29 to 49 percent of the wild population threatens decades of recovery progress. Known to cause lesions in a turtle's shell, severe cases can lead to lowered fitness and even death. Chicago's Shedd Aquarium and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign have joined the recovery efforts by collaborating to better understand the disease. The aquarium and university are looking at the disease from a microbial and pathological perspective to better understand its origin and the role environmental factors could play. The goal is to give young turtles a better chance at survival in the wild.

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.

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.

The Western pond turtle is one of 19 species that are part of the [Association of Zoos & Aquariums' \(AZA\) SAFE](#) (Saving Animals From Extinction) initiative, 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.

For more information or to become a zoo member, visit www.zoo.org or call 206.548.2500.

Summer zoo hours through September 30: 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. daily.

Founded in 1899, Woodland Park Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums and certified by the rigorous American Humane Conservation program. The Humane Certified™ seal of approval is another important validation of the zoo's long-standing tradition of meeting the highest standards in animal welfare. Woodland Park Zoo is helping to save animals and their habitats through more than 30 field projects in the Pacific Northwest and around the world. Each year, the zoo engages more than a million visitors of all ages, backgrounds, abilities, and walks of life in extraordinary experiences with animals, inspiring them to make conservation a priority in their lives and a difference in our planet's future ecological health and sustainability. Visit www.zoo.org and follow the zoo on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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