

PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

For immediate release | July 15, 2019
Media contact: Gigi Allianic, Meghan Sawyer
206.548.2550 | woodlandparkzoo@zoo.org

Zoo and biologists prepare turtles for release to the wild *Recovery is slow, but steady*

WHAT: Approximately 40 northwestern pond turtles (*Actinemys marmorata*), an endangered species, will be weighed, measured and marked for identification in preparation for being released to the wild at protected sites in the state.

The press is invited to watch the prep work at Woodland Park Zoo and chat with staff and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologists on **Thursday, July 18.**

The press is also invited to watch the turtles being released at the protected site in Lakewood, Wash. on **Friday, August 9.**

In 1991, only about 150 northwestern pond turtles remained in two populations in the state of Washington and the species nearly became extinct. In 1993, the state listed the northwestern pond turtle as endangered.

Returning the turtles to the wild is part of the collaborative [Northwestern Pond Turtle Recovery Project](#), Washington state's longest-running species reintroduction project.

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; the head start improves their chance of survival in the wild.

Unlike turtles in the wild, the head start turtles are fed at the zoo throughout the winter; 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 protected sites in their natural range and monitored by biologists.

Collaborative recovery efforts over the last 28 years have resulted in more than 2,300 turtles being head started and self-sustaining populations have been re-established in two regions of the state: Puget Sound and the Columbia River Gorge. Surveys indicate that more than 1,000 of the released turtles have survived and continue to thrive at six sites.

WHEN/ **WHERE:** **Thursday, July 18, 10:30 a.m.-noon:** The turtles will be weighed, measured, and marked for identification in preparation for their release to the wild.

Where: Behind the scenes at Woodland Park Zoo. Meet PR staff at the West Entrance at Phinney Ave. N. between N. 55th & N. 56th Sts. Park in the Penguin or Otter Lot.

Friday, August 9, 10:00-11:00 a.m.: The turtles will be released at a recovery site.

Where: Lakewood, Wash. For directions, please contact the zoo's PR staff **by August 8.** The release site is not publicized in order to protect the sensitive habitat.



VISUALS:

At the zoo: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologists and zoo staff weighing, measuring and marking ~40 turtles.

At the recovery site in Lakewood: zoo staff and guests releasing the turtles in the ponds.

INFO:

The western pond turtle (*Clemmys marmorata*) was recently subdivided into two species: northwestern (*Actinemys marmorata*) and southwestern (*Actinemys pallida*). Though now considered separate species, both are a medium-sized, semi-aquatic turtle. The northwestern pond turtle ranges in Washington to the San Joaquin Valley in California, and the southwestern in the San Joaquin Valley to Baja California, Mexico.

By 1990, the northwestern pond turtle numbers plummeted to only about 150 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 biologists could not find evidence confirming hatchling survival.

In 1991, Woodland Park Zoo and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) joined forces to recover northwestern 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.

Each spring, WDFW biologists go in the field to attach transmitters to adult female northwestern 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 and Oregon Zoos 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 Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife 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 northwestern pond turtle population still faces threats such as the loss of suitable habitat, invasive bullfrog predation and disease.

Visit [here](#) for tips on how to help protect turtles.

The northwestern pond turtle is one of more than 20 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 hours through September 2: 9:30 a.m.–6:00 p.m. daily. September 3 through September 30: 9:30 a.m.–4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday; 9:30 a.m.–6:00 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Founded in 1899, Woodland Park 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. The zoo is helping to save animals and their habitats in the wild through more than 35 wildlife conservation projects in the Pacific Northwest and around the world. 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. Visit www.zoo.org and follow the zoo on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

###