Zoo's geriatric red panda passes away

SEATTLE—Woodland Park Zoo is sad to announce that its beloved red panda, Yukiko (you-KEE-koh), was humanely euthanized today after an examination to evaluate cardiac issues related to old age.

At 16 years old, Yukiko lived well beyond the life expectancy of his species. The median life expectancy for red pandas in zoos is 10 years and 8 years in their natural habitat.

The geriatric red panda was recently diagnosed with severe heart disease and had been under close observation and treatment. Because he stopped taking prescribed medications and his appetite had decreased for the last few days, Woodland Park Zoo's animal health team brought in a veterinary cardiologist to better define his heart condition. The exam revealed that he was in heart failure due to advanced cardiomyopathy. Due to a poor prognosis and the compromised quality of Yukiko's life, the decision was made to humanely euthanize him.

Yukiko was born at Saitama Children's Zoo in Saitama, Japan and lived at Red River Zoo (Fargo, N.D.). He moved to Woodland Park Zoo in 2014 under the Red Panda Species Survival Plan conservation breeding program.

Yukiko had 11 cubs—four at Woodland Park Zoo and seven at his former home. "Yukiko's cubs brought so much joy and countless smiles to zoo-goers and communities locally and around the world. Many people didn't know what red pandas were until they connected with his bouncy cubs at the zoo or on social media," said Mark Myers, an animal curator at Woodland Park Zoo. "Yukiko's cubs moved many people to discover the world of red pandas. This is a difficult time for our staff and Yukiko will be missed."

A few years ago, Yukiko began showing normal signs of aging, which included minor spondylosis changes in the spine. His animal keepers noticed a slight decline in mobility as he moved around his enclosure. The zoo's veterinary team designed a physical rehabilitation program for Yukiko including a strength-building balance platform, massage, and laser therapy that the animal keepers implemented to focus on his strength and mobility.

Through the prescribed physical rehabilitation program, Yukiko's spine flexibility and back muscle strength improved. "Yukiko's quality of life vastly improved from the treatment regime and the strong foundation in training by our animal keepers. He was such a great patient to work with from the beginning," said Dr. Tim Storms, Woodland Park Zoo's interim Director of Animal Health. "By voluntarily participating in his rehabilitation, Yukiko was able to move about normally and with confidence, also enabling him to continue to breed successfully."

As a standard procedure, the zoo's animal health team will perform a necropsy (an animal autopsy) to further diagnose factors that may have contributed to Yukiko's decline and to share the results nationally among colleague scientists to help advance the understanding of medical issues in red pandas.

Red panda fans can visit Carson, a 7-year-old male, in the zoo's Temperate Forest. A 1-year-old male, Zan, currently lives in an off-view, indoor/outdoor enclosure.

Red pandas are found across the Himalayas and in mountainous regions of northern Myanmar and southern China. They live in high-altitude forests that have bamboo understories; red pandas share part of their range with giant pandas.

Although they share part of their name with giant pandas and may look a little like raccoons, they belong to a family of their own: Ailuridae. They have no living relatives, and their nearest fossil ancestors lived 3 to 4 million years ago.

An endangered species, fewer than 10,000 red pandas remain in their native habitat of bamboo forests in China, the Himalayas and Myanmar. Their numbers are declining due to deforestation, increased agriculture and cattle grazing, and continuing pressure from growing local populations.

Celebrate the life of Yukiko by supporting Woodland Park Zoo's Wildlife Survival Program, which includes the Red Panda Network whose multi-prong approach aims to conserve this flagship species in Nepal. Or become a ZooParent by adopting a red panda. ZooParent adoptions help the zoo provide exceptional care for all of Woodland Park Zoo's amazing animals and support wildlife conservation efforts in the Pacific Northwest and around the world.

For more information about Woodland Park Zoo, visit www.zoo.org or call 206.548.2500. Follow the zoo on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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