

PRESS RELEASE

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Media contact: Gigi Allianic, Cailleigh Robertson
206.548.2550 | woodlandparkzoo@zoo.org

Endangered turtles are released to the wild *Turtles crawling back from edge of extinction*

SEATTLE—Thanks to a multi-institutional recovery project, the state's population of western pond turtles grew today when Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Woodland Park Zoo released more than 100 of the endangered reptiles to protected ponds in Pierce and Mason Counties and the Columbia River Gorge.

For more photos on today's turtle release, visit the zoo's blog at: www.zoo.org/blog.

Western pond turtles were once common from Baja California to Puget Sound, including the Columbia River Gorge. In 1990, only about 150 of the turtles remained in the wild in Washington. These last remaining individuals struggled for survival as they battled predation by the non-native bullfrog, disease and habitat loss.

In 1991, the Western Pond Turtle Recovery Project was established to help bring the imperiled species back from the brink of extinction, and in 1993, the state listed western pond turtles as endangered. The multi-institutional conservation project is made possible by Woodland Park Zoo and its partners, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), Oregon Zoo, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

To help restore the rare pond turtles to their natural habitat, recovery workers take to the field each year. WDFW attaches transmitters to adult female western pond turtles and monitors the turtles every two hours during the nesting season to determine their nesting sites. The nests are protected with wire exclosure cages to help prevent predators from eating the eggs. In the fall, eggs and hatchlings are collected and transported to Woodland Park and Oregon Zoos, where they get a head start on life and can grow in safety.

"We return the turtles to their homes every summer once they reach a suitable size of about 2 ounces, a safeguard against the large mouths of bullfrogs," explained Dr. Jennifer Pramuk, Woodland Park Zoo's reptile curator. The turtles are cared for at the zoos throughout the winter with a regular diet of fish, worms and other high protein items. "Since they're raised in warmer temperatures at the zoo, they don't have to hibernate in the winter. The 10-month-old turtles are nearly as big as 3-year-old turtles would be that grew up in the wild.

The goal of the recovery project is to re-establish self-sustaining populations of western pond turtles in two regions of the state: Puget Sound and the Columbia River Gorge. Today, primarily through head starting and habitat acquisition, the population of the turtles has grown from 150 to an estimated 1,200 to 1,500 and is found in Washington wetlands at six sites in Klickitat, Skamania, Pierce and Mason Counties.

These six sites are managed by a combination of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission. "Collectively, the management of habitats at these locations in cooperation with the relevant state and federal agencies has allowed the turtles to regain a foothold within a small portion of their historic range. In the future, robust populations at these locations may be able to serve as a springboard for expansion into additional areas," said Lisa Hallock, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's lead for reptiles and amphibians for Endangered Species Section.

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This year, with financial support from Woodland Park Zoo, WDFW biologists will attach transmitters to some of the released turtles to determine survival rates.

Last November, biologists, conservation scientists, and endangered species recovery specialists from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Zoo, Woodland Park Zoo, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the World Conservation Union's (IUCN's) Conservation Breeding Specialist Group participated in a Population Habitat Viability Assessment Workshop to review the status of Washington's recovering turtle population to determine future actions, including the possibility of acquiring or restoring additional wetland sites.

While the western pond turtle is crawling its way back to recovery, the workshop underscored the reality that the endangered reptile continues to face challenges in the wild, acknowledged Dr. Fred Koontz, vice president of field conservation at Woodland Park Zoo. "The loss of wetlands, invasive bullfrog predation and plants, inappropriate ATV use and health concerns continue to threaten the turtles," said Koontz. "In addition, western pond turtles are long-living, 40+ years, and reproduce slowly. Losing an adult means a loss of as many as 30 years of hatchling production."

Another threat against the turtle that has recently emerged is a condition known as ulcerative shell disease, which causes ulcerative lesions in a turtle's shell. Advanced cases can lead to lowered fitness, paralysis and even death. "The cause of the disease is unknown but it is a priority of our recovery team to investigate the disease, identify the cause, and, we hope, develop effective treatment," explained Koontz.

In one study, scientists tracking the released turtles estimated that 95 percent of the turtles released back into the Columbia River Gorge survive annually. Survival at the Pierce and Mason County sites has also been high. Work by WDFW also indicates that some individual turtles associated with the reintroduction program have themselves survived to reproduce in the wild. "This is encouraging since self-sustaining, wild populations are the goal of the cooperative recovery effort," added Hallock.

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