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## **KEY LEADERSHIP APPOINTMENTS ENHANCE AND STRENGTHEN THE CONSERVATION MISSION AT NORTHWEST TREK WILDLIFE PARK AND POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM**

*Alan Varsik, Karen Povey put a fresh focus on bringing zoos' message to larger audiences*

TACOMA, Wash. – Conservation long has been in the DNA of Northwest Trek Wildlife Park and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium. The sister zoos are recognized for local, national and international leadership in the care and survival of endangered species and stewardship of the environment.



Now, two newly promoted leaders are creating an ambitious agenda for the two zoos to strengthen and expand their conservation mission in the community.

Alan Varsik recently was named Metro Parks Tacoma's Director of Zoological & Environmental Education, overseeing all operations at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium and Northwest Trek Wildlife Park.

**Alan Varsik is the newly promoted Director of Zoological & Environmental Education (ZEED) for Metro Parks Tacoma; Karen Povey assumes the new role of Conservation Engagement Manager for ZEED.**

Metro Parks' Executive Director Shon Sylvia made the appointment permanent after Varsik served for three months as interim director of the department. Varsik previously worked for two years as Deputy Director at Northwest Trek.

Karen Povey takes on the newly created role of Conservation Engagement Manager for Metro Parks' Zoological & Environmental Education. She is a 19-year Point Defiance Zoo employee who was promoted to the position of Education Curator at the zoo two years ago.

Protecting wildlife and the environment is an integral piece of the missions at the zoo and Northwest Trek, as well as their parent organization, Metro Parks Tacoma. These positions - and the people stepping into them - reinforce that mission with an eye to the future.

The position of Zoological & Environmental Education Director isn't so much a job as it is a calling, providing Varsik with the opportunity to promote conservation initiatives and create the storytelling that inspires visitors to care about wildlife and the natural world.

"I am honored to build on the zoo's 112-year legacy and Northwest Trek's 42-year history of showcasing animals in a way that helps visitors to learn more about them and take action to protect their counterparts in the wild," Varsik said.

“The earth is at a critical tipping point with quickly dwindling numbers of many endangered species. We have a chance to raise our voices on behalf of issues like stopping the poaching of elephants and tigers in Asia and Africa and reintroducing species like grizzly bears and Western pond turtles to the wild in their native Northwest homes. And we want to involve and engage the public in these efforts,” he added.

Varsik came to Metro Parks Tacoma in 2015 from the Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden, where he served as Chief Operating Officer. During his tenure as Deputy Director at Northwest Trek, the wildlife park near Eatonville celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary; set an attendance record with 214,696 visitors in 2015; and opened the \$1.9 million, nature-inspired Kids’ Trek play area a year ago. Northwest Trek set a new attendance record with more than 250,000 visitors last year.

In addition, Varsik provided crucial leadership during the process that led to a five-year accreditation from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums in 2016. Northwest Trek is one of only 232 zoos and aquariums in North America that meet AZA’s rigorous standards for superior animal-care, fiscal management and operational excellence.

Varsik holds a bachelor’s degree in environmental and systematic biology from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, and a master’s degree in conservation management from DePaul University in Chicago. His resume also includes stints as a university instructor and a breadth of conservation work, including with the California condor and Channel Island Fox.

In the last two years, he completed the Association of Zoos & Aquariums’ Executive Leadership Development Program and became a Certified Park and Recreation Professional through the National Park and Recreation Association.

Povey, who since 1998 has held various positions at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, spent the last two years as Education Curator. Assuming the role of Conservation Engagement Manager means collaborating with local agencies and community groups to spread the word about the importance of environmental protection.

“Metro Parks Tacoma has such a wide reach in our community, with so many different programs and activities,” Povey said. “I’m excited about the potential to infuse conservation in a much broader way. The world’s wildlife and natural areas are ever more threatened, so we need to focus even more on gaining support for protecting the animals and wild places that we all cherish.”

Metro Parks’ conservation initiative identifies three main goals: encouraging the community to celebrate nature; translating that love of nature to conservation actions that people can take in their own lives; and putting at the forefront Metro Parks’ dedication to sustaining wildlife and the environment, both locally and internationally.

Examples of those priorities include the long-established citizen science programs at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, as well as the zoo’s leadership in clouded leopard conservation. More recently, Northwest Trek and Metro Parks’ Zoological and Environmental Education Department took an active role in supporting a federal effort to restore the grizzly bear population in the North Cascades.

And on April 19, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the City of Tacoma, and the University of Washington-Tacoma will co-sponsor a screening of the documentary “A Plastic Ocean” on the university campus. The event is designed to help educate the public about the threat posed by plastic pollution in the world’s ocean and steps people can take to avoid single-use plastic bottles and other items. The film and subsequent discussion of it also will raise awareness about the city’s Bring Your Own Bag initiative and highlight the zoo’s Washed Ashore: Art of Save the Sea exhibit of larger-than-life sea creatures sculpted from plastic ocean trash. That exhibit opens at the zoo on April 22.

Those are the kinds of programs that motivate Povey, who in recent years has focused on helping people develop empathy for wildlife and on enabling youth, especially students at Tacoma’s Science and Math Institute, explore nature. Becoming Conservation Engagement Manager, she said, feels like the perfect next step in her professional commitment to connecting people with the natural world. She launched the animal ambassador programs at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium - laying the foundation for the zoo’s popular Wild Wonders Outdoor Theater - and, outside of the zoo, co-founded the not-for-profit Clouded Leopard Project, which raises money for clouded leopard conservation and research in Southeast Asia.

“I’ve always been looking for new and innovative ways to get people to care about and protect nature,” Povey said. “We live in such an incredible setting in Washington. I want to help people connect not only with their surroundings but also with wildlife and plants around the world. The more people spend time in nature, the more committed they are to protecting it.”

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*Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only combined zoo and aquarium, practices and promotes responsible stewardship of the world's resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The zoo, a division of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).*

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