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NORTHWEST TREK WILDLIFE PARK and POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM EARN DESIGNATION AS ‘SENSORY INCLUSIVE’ FOR SPECIAL NEEDS GUESTS

Northwest Trek Wildlife Park and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium each recently earned prestigious designation as “sensory inclusive” sites from a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing awareness, acceptance and inclusion for people with autism and other special needs.



The two zoos’ partnership with Alabama-based KultureCity included training of all staff members on how to recognize and approach guests who might be struggling with noise and crowds; setting up clearly marked Quiet Zones; and providing helpful tools to guests who may need them in order to feel more comfortable during their zoo visit.

A 12-year-old guest with a sensory-processing disorder checks out the caribou herd while using noise-canceling headphones provided by Northwest Trek for her comfort during a tram tour.

“We want each of our guests to have an amazing experience connecting with the animals at Northwest Trek Wildlife Park and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium,” said Alan Varsik, director of Zoological & Environmental Education for Metro Parks Tacoma. We think the addition of the KultureCity Sensory Inclusive® program will make our zoos much more welcoming and comfortable for our autistic guests and others who may be challenged by crowded or noise-filled situations.

“I applaud our staff for the initiative they’ve taken to earn certification for both of our zoos in this important service,” Varsik added.

Each of the sister zoos, operated by Metro Parks Tacoma, has a number of black, backpack-style Sensory Bags that guests may check out from staff. Checkout stations are in the carousel, just past the front gate,

at the zoo, and at the ticket windows at Northwest Trek. Weighted lap pads are available at the Tram Tour Station at Northwest Trek and at the Wild Wonders Outdoor Theater at the zoo.

Northwest Trek and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium are the only zoos in Washington certified by KultureCity. Oregon Zoo in Portland just announced its certification with the group. Inclusion and accommodation for people of all abilities is important to members of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, a prestigious organization that sets rigorous accreditation standards for member zoos.

Each of the Sensory Bags available at Northwest Trek and Point Defiance Zoo includes noise-canceling headphones, fidget tools, a feelings card for non-verbal guests to use in helping others understand their challenges, and an ID badge on a lanyard to identify the user as someone who may be challenged by sensory overloads.

Crowded, noise-filled areas can make it difficult for someone without these kinds of aids to enjoy their visit. Bright lights, certain smells and other stimuli can also trigger discomfort in individuals with sensory-processing difficulties. Sensory overload is often experienced by people with autism, dementia, PTSD and other conditions.

Before coming to Northwest Trek or Point Defiance Zoo, guests can download the free KultureCity app on their phones to learn more about sensory inclusion and available resources.

The new Sensory Bags and weighted lap pads at Northwest Trek proved their worth in the recent experience of 12-year-old Katherine Miles, who has a sensory processing disorder. The difference they make in the child's visits to the wildlife park near Eatonville are huge, her mother said.

"It's like night and day," said mom Kris Miles. "We've had a family membership for years, and come pretty often. But until now, when she rode in the tram she was talking non-stop, getting agitated. It was hard for her, and other people."

Katherine agrees the Sensory Inclusion® items helped her tremendously.

"With the headphones and the lap pad, I feel really calm inside," she said, tearing her eyes away from a bison munching just outside the window. "It helps me concentrate and remember."

For more information, go to www.nwtrek.org/sensory-inclusive or www.pdza.org/sensory-inclusive.

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Northwest Trek Wildlife Park and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium are members of the Metro Parks Tacoma family. Each is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums.

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