



Northwest Trek Wildlife Park

METRO PARKS TACOMA

NORTHWEST TREK WILDLIFE PARK ACCREDITED FOR ANOTHER FIVE YEARS FOLLOWING RIGOROUS REVIEW BY THE ASSOCIATION OF ZOOS & AQUARIUMS

Inspectors were particularly impressed with the new Kids' Trek play area and the way it meshes with the wildlife park's conservation mission and educational objectives

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SAN DIEGO, Calif. - Northwest Trek Wildlife Park was granted another five-year accreditation Thursday by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums during the group's annual meeting in San Diego, Calif.

Just last year, AZA recognized Northwest Trek with one of its new Quarter Century Awards for more than 25 years of continuous accreditation. The wildlife park near Eatonville, a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma, has been accredited by the prestigious peer organization since it first applied for the recognition in 1985.

"We are highly pleased to be recognized by our peers in this way," said Gary Geddes, director of Environmental and Zoological Education for Metro Parks Tacoma. "The inspection carried out earlier this year was rigorous. This is validation of the great work that Northwest Trek staff does every day to help visitors establish close connections with nature and learn about native Northwest species."

Accreditation by the association means visitors can be assured they're coming to a top-flight wildlife park that has passed inspection in every aspect of its operation, from animal care to visitor education to guest services.

"The Association of Zoos and Aquariums accredits only those zoos and aquariums that meet the highest standards," said AZA Interim President and CEO Kris Vehrs. "By achieving AZA-accreditation, Northwest Trek Wildlife Park demonstrates that it is dedicated to protecting species and educating its visitors about the natural world," she added. "The community can take great pride in knowing that Northwest Trek is dedicated to inspiring the next generation of conservationists."

The AZA inspection team that visited Northwest Trek in June called out several "Points of Particular Achievement" in its 35-page report. Those included:

- **Kids' Trek**, the half-acre, \$1.9 million nature-inspired play area that opened April 2. Kids' Trek was a busy place filled with children and families, the inspectors noted, and the experiences it provides "are closely aligned with the zoo's mission and educational objectives."
- **Zip Wild**, the complex of zip line/challenge courses opened in 2012, has increased visitorship to Northwest Trek, attracted new audiences and is well-integrated into the tree canopy to give visitors another way to enjoy nature, the inspectors said.

- **The Northwest Trek Foundation** and the wildlife park's Development Department "are to be commended" for the successful Kids' Trek fund-raising campaign, the inspectors said.
- **Recent staff additions**, including Deputy Director Alan Varsik and Zoological Curator Marc Heinzman, are providing fresh perspectives and leading a staff brimming with camaraderie and enthusiasm for their work and the wildlife park's mission, the report said.

Inspectors also positively cited the use of technology by staff for animal record keeping and improvements in animal health care. For examples, keepers in the wildlife park's 435-acre Free-Roaming Area now use tablets to make their daily notes on the appearance and health of animals like bison, elk and moose.

In other portions of their report, the inspectors said they were impressed by the teamwork and professionalism of the staff in every area of the wildlife park; pointed out that Northwest Trek focuses on interactive, personal experiences for guests, including up-close animal encounters presented in "a well thought out and caring way;" and remarked on conservation initiatives that include Citizen Science and NatureMapping programs, work with Mount Rainier National Park on the reintroduction of fishers to the Cascades, and collaboration with the Trumpeter Swan Society to provide trumpeter swan cygnets for release into the wild.

It's been a joy-filled week for staff members at Northwest Trek and the leadership of Metro Parks Tacoma. On Sunday, the wildlife park surpassed its all-time attendance record.

"We know that Northwest Trek is well-regarded by visitors, many of whom purchase memberships and come back again and again," said Metro Parks Tacoma Assistant Executive Director Shon Sylvia. "The AZA accreditation granted Thursday is testament to the fact that the wildlife park also is held in high regard by its peers."

Metro Parks Commission President Erik Hanberg pointed out that the building of Kids' Trek was a wonderful collaboration of Tacoma voters, the Northwest Trek Foundation and a wide range of donors and sponsors. About three-quarters of the funding for Kids' Trek came from the foundation, grants, and donations from companies and individuals. Money set aside in a Metro Parks Tacoma voter-approved bond issue also helped pay for the play area.

"We are blessed to have such wonderful and wide-ranging community support," Hanberg said.

To be accredited, Northwest Trek underwent a thorough review to assure it has and will continue to meet rising standards, which include animal care and welfare, veterinary programs, conservation, education, and safety. AZA requires zoos and aquariums to successfully complete this process every five years in order to be members of the Association.

The accreditation process includes a detailed application and a meticulous on-site inspection by a team of trained zoo and aquarium professionals. The inspecting team observes all aspects of the institution's operation, including animal care and welfare; keeper training; safety for visitors, staff and animals; educational programs; conservation efforts; veterinary programs; financial stability; risk management; visitor services; and other areas.

"We will be happy to frame and hang our new Certificate of Accreditation," Varsik said. "We are proud of our accomplishments. But we also are very much looking forward – and studying what we can do, what exhibits might be possible, to connect our visitors even more closely with nature."

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Northwest Trek, accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, is a 725-acre zoological park dedicated to conservation, education and recreation by displaying, interpreting and researching native Northwest wildlife and their natural habitats. The wildlife park is a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma and is located 35 miles southeast of Tacoma off State Highway 161.

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