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ALAN VARIK NAMED INTERIM DIRECTOR OF ZOOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FOR METRO PARKS TACOMA

TACOMA, Wash. -- Alan Varsik, a lifelong zoologist with deep administrative experience at several zoos, is the newly

named Interim Director of Zoological and Environmental Education for Metro Parks Tacoma, effective today.



He was appointed to the post by Metro Parks Tacoma Executive Director Shon Sylvania. Varsik has been Deputy Director of Northwest Trek Wildlife Park since 2015.

In his new position, he will oversee all operations at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium and Northwest Trek.

Varsik succeeds Gary Geddes, who is retiring after nearly 36 years with Metro Parks Tacoma.

Geddes served in the Zoological and Environmental Education directorship

since 2000.

Alan Varsik, Interim Director of Zoological and Environmental Education, Metro Parks Tacoma.

“Metro Parks is fortunate to have an executive of Alan’s caliber ready to move up to the next level of leadership,” Sylvania said in announcing the appointment. “Alan’s collaborative management style, up-from-the-ranks experience and deep commitment to the conservation initiatives that are at the core of this position make him the perfect person for the job.”

Sylvania said he intends to consider Varsik’s permanent status in March.

Varsik joined Metro Parks Tacoma 22 months ago, coming from 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 40th anniversary; set an attendance record with 214,696 visitors in 2015; and opened the \$1.9 million, nature-inspired Kids’ Trek play area this year. The wildlife park is on track to shatter the attendance mark set just a year ago. By Dec. 31, around 252,000 visitors will have walked through Northwest Trek’s gates this year.

In addition, Varsik provided crucial leadership during a painstaking inspection process that led to a five-year accreditation from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums this year. Northwest Trek is one of only 232 zoos and aquariums in North America that meet the professional peer group'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.

He began his career working at a children's zoo in Oakland, Calif.

From those beginnings, he moved on to working with primates at Brookfield Zoo near Chicago; served as curator at Lincoln Park Zoo; worked as zoological manager in the Tree of Life area at Disney's Animal Kingdom when that park opened; was general curator and assistant director at Santa Barbara Zoo; and served as chief operating officer at Oklahoma City Zoo before his arrival at Northwest Trek.

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.

"I'm very excited about this opportunity," Varsik said. "Gary Geddes has set the stage for a bright future at the zoo and Northwest Trek," he added, pointing to the highly successful debut of Kids' Trek and the planned opening of the Pacific Seas Aquarium at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium in 2018, among other projects.

Those strong foundations will leave Varsik and his leadership teams free to put great emphasis and focus on conservation initiatives and the storytelling that engages visitors and entices them to care about wildlife and wild places, he said.

As a front-line animal keeper for almost 10 years, Varsik learned not only about caring for animals but about what resonates with visitors and makes them want to take action on behalf of wildlife.

It's that background - a heart for animals and a desire to connect our community with the natural world - that he believes will serve him well in his new position.

"This is an amazing opportunity with a very talented staff and a very supportive community," Varsik said. "It's our job to continue to be leaders in the field and to ensure that there is a cultural relevance to what we do. This is a time when the connections people make to the natural world are increasingly important."

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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).

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, a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma, is located 35 miles southeast of Tacoma off State Highway 161.

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