



## **E.T. WALRUS DIES AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM**

*33-year-old Pacific walrus did not recover from anesthesia following surgery*



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TACOMA, Wash. – E.T., the wondrous walrus who came to Tacoma as an orphan in 1982 and quickly became a cherished member of the community, died this afternoon at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium. He did not recover from anesthesia following a two-hour surgery to drain a severely infected pharyngeal pouch.

“At age 33, he was a geriatric walrus with multiple medical issues,” said zoo head veterinarian Dr. Karen Wolf. “He had been ill for many weeks with a serious bacterial infection. He had not eaten for 17 days, and he suffered from painful arthritis that made it difficult for him to haul out of the water.”

Zoo Deputy Director John Houck described E.T. as a superb ambassador for his species.

“We are extremely saddened by the loss of E.T., who was a well-loved member of the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium family and a community icon who delighted generations of visitors,” Houck said. “He leaves a legacy of

helping people learn about walrus and other Arctic mammals and the perils they face due to climate change.”

E.T.’s influence went far beyond Tacoma. The enormous Pacific walrus had a worldwide following, largely due to his amazing capacity to make more than half a dozen interesting sounds from whistling to a throaty, bell-like vibration. A Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAVL61yeCYs> of his vocalization repertoire went viral after the zoo posted it to the internet in 2012 and has been viewed more than 2.8 million times. It’s also been seen by hundreds of millions on television shows and documentaries around the world.

The huge walrus fell ill a year ago, and his condition grew critical in May 2014, but he recovered and returned to exhibit, much to the delight of legions of his fans. Health issues, including the arthritis, continued to persist and recently became more serious. He showed signs of not feeling well for several weeks and was under careful watch by members of the zoo’s Rocky Shores staff and veterinary teams.

Veterinarians ran blood samples, attempted ultrasounds and conducted other diagnostic tests in an effort to determine the cause of E.T.’s continuing discomfort and lack of appetite. They also put him on a number of medications for pain, as well as broad-spectrum antibiotics to combat infection and inflammation.

Nevertheless, his white blood cell count continued to climb; his lack of appetite persisted; and he suffered from bouts of coughing, Wolf said. E.T., who loved to swim and splash in and around his exhibit, also became lethargic and was reluctant to move at times.

Over the course of his illness, his weight dropped into the 2,750-pound range, which was significantly low for him. Before his breeding season, E.T.’s weight annually approached 4,000 pounds.

Despite the aggressive treatment, the bacterial infection in his pharyngeal pouch continued to grow, creating a large abscess that posed an imminent threat to his health, Wolf said. She listed his condition as “guarded to grave” and assembled a team of veterinary surgeons to open up the infected pouch and allow the abscess to drain.

The large pharyngeal pouch is a unique feature of male walrus anatomy that is a part of the neck and communicates with the throat. It helps males float in the water and allows them to make specific sounds during the breeding season.

In addition to Wolf, today’s medical team included Dr. Ellen Wiedner and Dr. Colleen Clabbers of Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium; Dr. James Bailey, an expert in marine mammal anesthesiology; and three local veterinary experts.

More than a dozen other Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium staff members, including two veterinary technicians and zookeepers who care for E.T. daily, also assisted with the procedures.

“Unfortunately, E.T. experienced cardiac arrest during anesthesia,” Wolf said. “Intensive efforts to resuscitate him were unsuccessful.”

Veterinarians plan to do a necropsy on E.T. this evening. In addition, tissue and fluid samples from the abscess that was drained during surgery will be sent out to pathologists for study.

“E.T. was an utterly amazing animal,” said senior staff biologist Lisa Triggs, who trained and cared for E.T. in the zoo’s Rocky Shores exhibit area for 19 years. “He was extremely bright and usually patient and forgiving with his keepers.”

Over the years, E.T. learned a wide range of behaviors to help zookeepers care for him and monitor his health. Those ranged from opening his mouth so his teeth could be cleaned to presenting a flipper for voluntary blood draws and entering and exiting his pool on command.

This cooperation aided scientific research into the behavior and physical traits of Pacific walrus.

In a collaborative project with other accredited zoos in the United States, Triggs studied hormonal changes and seasonal reproductive behavior in E.T. and his female companions, Joan and Basilla, for her 2014 master of science degree at the University of Washington, adding to the body of knowledge on this little-researched subject.

Point Defiance Zoo staff also helped another scientist, Shawn R. Noren of the University of California at Santa Cruz, with Noren's study of blubber thickness in Pacific walrus. The work could ultimately help E.T.'s wild brethren as they wrestle with the effects of climate change.

Meanwhile, E.T.'s vocalizations – sounds walrus make in the wild for everything from courtship to crisis – made him an international superstar and helped people around the world learn more about his species.

At the zoo, he was a favorite during Rocky Shores keeper talks, often making his interesting form of vocal music and waving his flipper to the crowds gathered to watch. A three-day celebration of his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday drew thousands of people in 2012.

In 2014, he starred in a nationally televised IBM commercial about a business partnership with the zoo.

“At Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, we envision a world where people and wildlife share the Earth in harmony,” Houck said. “E.T. helped spread our message of caring and concern for all animals well beyond Tacoma. He will be greatly missed.”

People who wish to express their condolences and remembrances of E.T. may do so by posting comments on the zoo's Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/Ptdefiancezoo](http://www.facebook.com/Ptdefiancezoo); visiting the zoo and writing messages on a giant banner staff have prepared; or sending cards to Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium staff, 5400 N. Pearl St., Tacoma, WA 98407.

Those who want to make donations to The Zoo Society's Dr. Holly Reed Conservation Fund in E.T.'s honor may do so at [www.pdza.org/donate](http://www.pdza.org/donate) or by calling The Zoo Society at 253-404-3651.

More information about E.T. is available at [www.pdza.org/ET](http://www.pdza.org/ET).

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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).*