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A THIRD FEMALE WALRUS ARRIVES AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO AS A BREEDING PARTNER FOR DOZER

Walrus experts are hopeful that Dozer, a huge male, will successfully mate with one or more females

TACOMA, Wash. – Dozer’s group of “girlfriends” has grown from two to three.

Kulu, a 22-year-old female Pacific walrus, arrived at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium this week as part of a managed breeding program.

The 1,346-pound walrus is on loan from the Wildlife Conservation Society’s New York Aquarium.

She joins Dozer, a 3,650-pound male, and females Joan and Basilla at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium’s Rocky Shores habitat. Dozer is 23, Joan is 21, and Basilla is 33.

They are among only 14 Pacific walruses at accredited zoos and aquariums in the United States. That means visitors to Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium have the opportunity to see nearly a third of all Pacific walruses in the nation’s accredited zoos and aquariums.

“This is an extremely rare occurrence, and it underscores the importance of having these four walruses together in the hope that they might produce some calves,” Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium Aquatic Animal Curator Neil Allen said.

“Their numbers are critically low. Walruses in zoos and aquariums are ambassador animals that help teach us about the perils that climate change poses to their counterparts in the wild.”

Keepers describe Kulu as a playful walrus with a strong personality who is excited to learn new behaviors. Kulu is in Tacoma on a long-term loan while renovations are made to repair storm damage at New York Aquarium.

Dozer arrived at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium from Sea World San Antonio last month on a breeding loan through the Walrus Conservation Consortium, a group of zoos and aquariums that either have walruses in their care or are active in the quest to conserve the iconic marine mammals.

Members of the consortium have studied walruses for decades and believe there’s a greater chance that reproduction might occur with a larger group of females and one male. In the wild, a dominant male typically will mate with several females during the breeding season.

Dozer is scheduled to remain in Tacoma through the rut, or breeding season, which generally runs into spring.

Joan and Basilla have been residents in the zoo’s Rocky Shores area for many years.

Though male walruses remain in rut for several months, females have brief annual fertility periods that last for only a few

days at most. Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium staff members track the walrus' hormone levels with blood samples. The walrus are trained to voluntarily present their flippers for the blood draws.

The process of producing a baby walrus takes time. Once a walrus egg is fertilized, the embryo is not implanted in the uterus for four to five months. The gestation period is about 15 months.

Members of the Walrus Conservation Consortium agreed that Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium is a great place to put Dozer together with three females, Allen said. Zoo staff members are recognized leaders in animal reproduction, walrus research and conservation efforts.

Walrus are listed as a vulnerable species on the Red List published by the International Union of Concerned Scientists.

The Pacific walrus is covered by the Marine Mammal Protection Act and is listed as a candidate for further safeguarding by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act.

Dozer, Kulu, Joan and Basilla are on exhibit daily in the zoo's Rocky Shores area. The zoo is operating on a special Winter Break schedule and is open from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day through Jan. 2 with a one-day closure on Dec. 25.

For more information, go to www.pdza.org or www.pdza.org/rocky-shores.

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only combined zoo & 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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