



## POINT DEFIANCE ZOO MOURNS LOSS OF BELOVED ELEPHANT SUKI

*Suki, one of the zoo's oldest residents, was euthanized yesterday after steady decline in health*

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TACOMA, Wash. – Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium said goodbye to one of its oldest and most beloved residents yesterday. Suki, an elderly Asian elephant who came to Tacoma nearly three decades ago, was humanely euthanized yesterday after a steady decline in her health over the past few weeks.

“We lost a special member of our zoo family yesterday and our staff and community are grieving,” said Zoo Director Alan Varsik. “Suki’s long life says a lot about the high quality of care she received over the 28 years that Point Defiance Zoo was her home.”

At nearly 60, Suki (pronounced SOO-kee) lived far beyond the median life expectancy of 48 years for female Asian elephants in human care. She was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 2019 and had chronic arthritis and uterine tumors, similar to fibroids.

Over the past several weeks, Suki had been showing signs of increasing discomfort and cognitive decline, possibly indicative of a stroke or other neurological disease. When she refused supportive care yesterday, the zoo veterinary and animal care teams made the difficult decision to euthanize her.

“With Suki’s advanced age, chronic medical conditions, and significant decline in health, humane euthanasia was the only compassionate course of action,” said Dr. Karen Wolf, the zoo’s head veterinarian.

When Suki came to Tacoma in 1996, Point Defiance Zoo was among a handful of zoos pioneering the modern concept of protected contact in which elephants and their keepers never share the same space. And Suki needed a home with state-of-the-art facilities and a staff skilled in caring for elephants with demonstrated histories of anti-social behavior.

A former circus elephant, Suki thrived under protected contact and positive reinforcement from her experienced elephant care team who tended to her daily needs. In their care, she received plenty of exercise for her mind and body and regular enrichments, ranging from stimulating activities to tasty treats.

“Suki was a very smart elephant with a big personality,” said Elephant Manager Shannon Smith who cared for Suki for over two decades. “She loved eating watermelon and banana leaves, splashing in her pools, and getting her tongue gently scratched. She was an extraordinary animal and will be deeply missed by everyone who knew her.”



The elderly elephant voluntarily participated in her own health care, presenting her feet, trunk, mouth and ears to her care team so they could identify any health issues and swiftly address them. She also stood patiently every day as her keepers gently washed her feet, filed her nails and treated any health issues.

As Suki aged and lost her last set of teeth, her keepers adapted the way they prepared her food. They thinly sliced her vegetables and fruit, soaked her hay pellets, chopped her hay, and removed the rinds from her watermelon.

“Our highly skilled veterinary and animal care teams provided Suki with comprehensive and compassionate care every day,” said Malia Somerville, the zoo’s general curator.

Suki also played a crucial role in helping staff members talk to guests about the perils that elephants face in Asia and Africa.

“She lived a long, full life and was an exceptional ambassador for her species,” said Somerville. “Millions of our guests connected with her and that connection inspired them to care deeply about elephants and to help protect them in the wild. We’ll continue to celebrate Suki’s life and honor her contribution to her species through our support of elephant conservation in Sumatra.”

Point Defiance Zoo is an active partner in global efforts to protect Asian and African elephants. Through the Zoo Society’s Dr. Holly Reed Wildlife Conservation Fund, the Tacoma zoo helps support forest rangers in Sumatra who patrol forests for poachers and work to reduce human-elephant conflict by herding wild elephants away from settlements.

Asian elephants are listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Their numbers are dwindling due to poaching, habitat loss and other human-animal conflicts. It is estimated that just 30,000 to 50,000 elephants remain in fragmented populations from India to Borneo.

To learn more about donating to elephant conservation in honor of Suki, visit [www.pdza.org/care/holly-reed/](http://www.pdza.org/care/holly-reed/)

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