



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**THE MARYLAND ZOO IN BALTIMORE BIDS FOND FAREWELL
TO ALASKA THE POLAR BEAR**

Alaska, confiscated from a Mexican circus, was brought to Maryland Zoo in 2002

BALTIMORE, MD -- The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore is saddened to announce the passing of beloved female polar bear, Alaska. Alaska had been suffering from kidney failure, a common ailment for geriatric bears, but had overall remained in good health until recently. During the past several weeks, Alaska's quality of life had declined sharply and she was humanely euthanized this morning.

"Alaska was such a remarkable polar bear with a story that touched thousands of people over the course of her life here at the Zoo," said Don Hutchinson, president and CEO of The Maryland Zoo. "Words cannot describe how our entire staff is feeling, in particular the keepers who worked with her every day for years. In the ten years she lived at the Zoo with Magnet, we think she enjoyed a good life here."

Alaska came to The Maryland Zoo in March of 2002 after she was confiscated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Puerto Rico. Alaska was one of seven polar bears that were part of a Mexican circus which abandoned the bears in Puerto Rico, pending investigation into the origins of the bears. Alaska was the first bear seized; the remaining bears were confiscated in November 2002 and went to other accredited zoos around the country.

"When Alaska arrived at the Zoo, she was overweight and had poor muscle tone," said Mike McClure, general curator. "We weren't sure if she would even know how to swim. However, with a change in diet and lifestyle, she did end up spending a lot of time in the pool with Magnet and she became a Zoo favorite."

As Alaska was settling in at the Zoo, keepers noticed she didn't react to their voices or other noises around the area. During a thorough examination, veterinarians determined that she was indeed deaf. "The keepers developed a training program for Alaska that combined hand signals and other visual cues so they could work effectively with her," continued McClure. "She knew more behaviors than the other two bears combined, which made it much easier to provide her with the thorough care she needed as an older bear."

Polar bears have an incredibly powerful sense of smell which they use to track seals under the sea ice across the tundra. This sense served Alaska well at The Maryland Zoo because she would wake up from her naps when she smelled a familiar keeper walk by or when food was presented.

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"Alaska was diagnosed with early kidney disease, a common ailment in bears, almost five years ago in February of 2008," stated Dr. Ellen Bronson, chief veterinarian for the Zoo. "We were able to manage her kidney disease very well for a long time, which was in no small part due to the keeper's efforts, their ability to collect diagnostic samples regularly, and the multifaceted medical and nutritional treatments we worked out for her."

"As geriatric bear, we focused on keeping her level of care consistent, and providing a special diet to slow the progression of disease and to keep her weight up. We had been monitoring her for any signs of lethargy or discomfort, adjusting medications as necessary. Unfortunately, it became apparent that her quality of life was in decline and we knew that the time had come to make the tough decision to euthanize her," continued Bronson.

It is estimated that Alaska was in her late 20's; although her exact age and birth date is uncertain, as no known records exist of her years from birth through her time in the circus. Median life expectancy is 24.1 years for female polar bears, according to experts with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. (AZA).

"A necropsy will be performed as vital information can continue to be gleaned from her scientifically," stated Bronson. "She will contribute to research studies and can benefit polar bears with similar disease in the years to come."

"Alaska was a very special animal," said McClure. "One of the most amazing and personable bears you'll ever see in your life. She will be sorely missed."

The Maryland Zoo has two polar bears on exhibit at Polar Bear Watch, male Magnet and female Anoki.

About The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore

Founded in 1876, The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore is the third oldest zoo in the United States and is internationally known for its contributions in conservation and research. More than 1,500 animals are represented in the Zoo's varied natural habitat exhibits in areas such as Polar Bear Watch, the Maryland Wilderness, African Journey and the award-winning Children's Zoo. Situated in Druid Hill Park near downtown Baltimore, the Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. For more information, visit www.marylandzoo.org.

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