



METRO PARKS TACOMA

2023 Community Impact Report

Fulfilling our mission
and commitments
to our community

Achieving More Through Partnerships

PARTNERSHIPS: Concentrate on economic sustainability by working collaboratively with other public agencies to avoid waste, duplication and inefficiencies; in partnership with community, work together to responsibly leverage and stretch public funds.

Began reducing the gap for South Tacoma families within a 10-minute walk from a park

We took two giant steps toward Tacoma's goal for every household to be within a 10-minute walk to their nearest park. Through a partnership between Metro Parks and Tacoma Public Schools, led by our non-profit partner the Trust for Public Land, students and neighbors of Helen B. Stafford and Jennie Reed elementary schools reimagined the school grounds as spaces to function as neighborhood parks outside of school hours. Stafford and Reed Community Schoolyards are anticipated to open for neighborhood access in early 2024. South Tacoma will see three more schools - Whitman, Larchmont, and Mann Elementaries - begin similar transformations in the year ahead.

Provided Adventure Within Reach through countywide network serving individuals with disabilities

Joining with Pierce County Parks during the pandemic has allowed the specialized recreation program to expand. Not only does the program now reach more than 11,000 participants annually, three more partners - Puyallup, Sumner and Lakewood - have joined the network. This partnership drastically reduced travel times for participants, which increased accessibility to activities and events.

Celebrated cultural traditions, learning together through event partnerships on the Eastside

Performing, visual, and culinary arts set the stage for three dynamic community celebrations presented in partnership with cultural groups that received Tacoma Creates grant awards. More than 1,600 community members welcomed 2023 at a Tet Lunar New Year celebration curated and produced by Golden Bamboo. Summer brought performers, pageantry, a host of community resources, Black businesses and throngs of visitors to a dynamic Juneteenth celebration at Stewart Heights Park curated and produced by Way Out Kids. The Calavera Collective united the community once again in partnership with Eastside Community Center for a day of celebration and remembrance of loved ones during Dia de los Muertos in October.



Our Community Schoolyards with Trust for Public Land and Tacoma Public Schools will significantly increase the number of homes within a 10-minute walk from a park in South Tacoma.

Engaged hundreds of students from South and East Tacoma in science and outdoor exploration

Our innovative and award-winning Wildlife Champions program, developed in collaboration with Tacoma Public Schools, helped over 630 students from Arlington and Lister elementary schools develop empathy for wildlife and forge deep connections to nature. Nearby Oak Tree and Swan Creek parks serve as classrooms for lessons rooted in environmental learning.

Hosted Community Resource Fairs to connect underserved communities with health and wellness resources

Challenges related to food insecurity, healthcare, housing, transportation, employment, and other vital resources affect many in our community. On average, 750 individuals received support through each Community Market Resource Fair we co-hosted in partnership with Coordinated Care.

Collaborated in a multi-agency study centered on the “State of Play” and the wellbeing of our youth

Kids in our community fall below state and national averages for daily activity and report higher levels of mental health issues, based on a year long analysis by the Aspen Institute that provided important findings to help address the wellbeing of Tacoma’s youth. Guided by an advisory group of 19 community leaders whose work revolves around play, sports, recreation and healthy communities, the study includes 40 findings and recommendations informed by youth surveys and focus-group discussions with young people, coaches, sports administrators and parents. The most common need reported was for more turf fields, field lights, and indoor facilities to provide outlets for activity during dark, wet Northwest months. The report cited Tacoma’s Whole Child approach of community-wide collaboration to serve youth 24-hours/day as our most important asset to help address the issues our kids are facing.



Learn more: <https://projectplay.org/communities/tacoma-pierce-county>





Creating a Sense of Belonging: Access & Inclusion

ACCESS & INCLUSION: Improve access and proximity to parks and programs for all who live in Tacoma, with attention to engaging diverse income levels and race/ethnicities through our parks, facilities, services, infrastructure and programs; attention shall be given to traditionally underserved populations with a focus on children.

Reduced economic barriers to connect our community to nature and wildlife

Our new Wild Access program at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium and Northwest Trek Wildlife Park has helped ensure that economic circumstances are not obstacles to connecting with wildlife. The popular program offers heavily discounted daytime admission tickets and memberships to individuals and families who qualify for income assistance or participate in foster/kinship care. More than 26,000 individuals and 4,000 families have used Wild Access to experience our two zoos and meet animals up close this year.

Provided full scholarships for low-income and foster children to participate in Zoo camps

This year, 146 children received full scholarships to Zoo summer and winter camps, courtesy of The Zoo Society. Eligible children came from Pierce County families who qualify for income assistance programs or participate in foster/kinship care.



Wild Access created opportunities to ensure more community members could experience our two zoos and meet animals up close this year.

30,700

Daytime tickets and memberships sold in Jan.-Nov. 2023

13,900

Daytime tickets and memberships sold in 2022

+121%



Created inclusive opportunities for non-English speakers to learn about community centers

Hundreds of participants joined Community Welcome Tours piloted in Ukrainian, Korean, and Spanish in 2023. Designed to familiarize community members with diverse resources, amenities, and programs, participants received welcome packets in their native language introducing them to their local centers and staff as the first step in introducing new users to all Metro Parks has to offer.

Celebrated Pride with Our LGBTQIA+ community

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium and Northwest Trek Wildlife Park collaborated with Rainbow Center and Oasis Youth Center to celebrate Pride and welcome our LGBTQIA+ community.



Engaging Our Community With Intentionality

ENGAGEMENT: Collaborate with community to achieve equity and inclusion in our parks, programs, and facilities to develop faith, trust, and relevance by aligning resources with community needs. Continuously engage community to effectively respond to feedback and build trust in our decision-making.

Collaborated with community to update master plans for Portland Avenue Park and Peck Field

Engaging with neighbors and stakeholders, Metro Parks hosted a series of workshops, pop up events, interactive websites and open houses in the development of two newly adopted park master plans that provide a clear vision for the future of these parks. The newly adopted plans provide the needed framework to begin pursuing funds to build out the identified priorities within these underserved neighborhoods in our community.

Hosted three regional events rooted in Metro Parks mission

Point Defiance Flower & Garden Festival returned after 15 years, drawing 10,000 to 15,000 people with free and paid experiences including garden tours, lectures, farmers market and a beer and wine garden.

4th of July Summer Blast was an explosive event filled with free family-friendly music, food, craft vendors and entertainment culminating with a fireworks show over Commencement Bay. The day-long event brought out about 50,000 people to enjoy the city's beautiful waterfront and iconic Dune Peninsula Park.

MOSAIC Arts and Culture Festival was a celebration of the diverse cultures represented in Tacoma, offering community performances that ranged from a showcase of Gospel music to a demonstration of professional wrestling from Mexico. The event has honored international art forms in the city since 1986.

United with the Equity Action Collaborative

Under the leadership of the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, Metro Parks and the City of Tacoma have formed the Equity Action Collaborative (EAC). Together, our staffs are working to align interagency processes and systems and are adopting consistent practices to become accessible and inclusive government service providers. We're collaborating to better address the priorities of our underserved communities and achieve greater outcomes, as well as operating efficiencies. The EAC activated a shared interactive website to help gather public input and sentiments. Metro Parks pages were viewed more than 20,750 times by nearly 8,000 unique visitors to project sites during 2023.



Beyond the Bell and Club B continue to expand opportunities for youth and increase enrollment from 2022 to 2023.

Total programs & fieldtrips offered:



Total enrollment:



Supported Whole Child initiative by expanding Beyond the Bell and Club B

Through a dynamic community initiative, Metro Parks, Tacoma Public Schools (TPS), and Greentrike established Beyond the Bell and Club B to provide out-of-school-time growth opportunities available at all 36 elementary and 11 middle schools. The program was rapidly developed in partnership with dozens of program providers and instructors to launch during the 2021/2022 as returned to the classroom following nearly a year of isolation during the pandemic. The school-based programs were designed to provide access for all youth to expand social/emotional learning, STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math), and wellness through club activities and school-based youth sports.

In response to the the instant demand for the program, Metro Parks and our partners worked to expand offerings at all locations throughout 2023, adding more fieldtrips for Data Days and increasing both the number and breadth of experiences offered through the afterschool clubs.





Supporting Our People and Our Planet Through Conservation & Sustainability

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: The Plan aims to further limit the park district's environmental impact and enhance the livability of Tacoma. It sets realistic targets and identifies ways to implement them. It establishes regular monitoring of the district's progress. It is integral to our promise to deliver the best to our district and the people who live here.

Welcomed two polar bear cubs to an updated Zoo habitat and guest area

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium welcomed polar bear twins Astra and Laerke to an updated Arctic Tundra habitat, replacing rockwork with paw-friendly soft sand and adding new log structures for climbing. Zoo staff also added new, engaging signage to help guests connect to wild polar bears, learn what they need to survive, and understand actions they can take to protect them.

Participated in promising study to protect wild bats from a devastating disease

Northwest Trek Wildlife Park partnered with scientists from Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and other organizations to test the effectiveness of a potentially groundbreaking treatment to help wild bats survive the effects of white-nose syndrome. If the innovative probiotic spray is effective, it could be revolutionary in saving wild bats in Washington and across the country. White-nose syndrome affects only hibernating bats and does not affect humans or other wildlife.



Celebrated the birth of 12 critically endangered red wolf pups

Twelve healthy American red wolf pups were born at Point Defiance Zoo's off-site breeding facility this year. Zoo staff helped facilitate the "fostering" of one of these newborn pups into the den of wild parents and the release of a three-year-old red wolf born at the off-site facility into the wild. Point Defiance Zoo has been a national leader in bringing the red wolf back from the brink of extinction since the 1970s, and 2023 was one of the most successful years in the zoo's history of working to recover this iconic American species.

Launched scientific surveys of underwater kelp forests at Owen Beach and Titlow Beach

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium divers completed their first surveys of kelp forests at Owen Beach and Titlow Beach. These vital underwater forests provide homes, protection, and food to many species, from tiny crabs and young fish to sea otters and harbor seals. The data that divers collect at these and other sites across Washington will help scientists and policymakers develop a coordinated and collaborative approach to protecting declining kelp forests in Puget Sound.

Connected our community to marine animals through low tide beach walks

Trained naturalists from Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium and Tacoma Nature Center helped our community identify tide pool animals and learn how to gently touch them at beach walks. The four free events, led by Zoo naturalists, engaged over 1,960 participants.

Encouraged our community to observe nature through the City Nature Challenge

Nearly 800 community members participated in the annual City Nature Challenge this spring, submitting over 10,000 nature observations and identifying 1,437 species, highlighting the extraordinary diversity of native species in our region. Of special note, participants observed 28 threatened or endangered species, including Oregon forest snail, western toad, and orca.

Raised and released hundreds of endangered northern leopard frogs back into the wild

Northwest Trek Wildlife Park staff raised and released nearly 300 endangered northern leopard frogs back into the wild at the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge. Giving these frogs a head-start by raising them free of predators offers them a better chance of survival in the wild. This multi-year conservation project is a partnership with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Oregon Zoo, and Washington State University.



Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium and Northwest Trek Wildlife Park participate in global efforts to save species from extinction through the Association of Zoos & Aquariums' Saving Animals From Extinction (SAFE) program.

Evolving to Equitably Meet Community Needs

RACIAL EQUITY: Intentionally work towards overcoming systemic racism and implicit bias within our institution, other public agencies, and the community.

Directed maintenance resources to park improvements in areas rated lower on Tacoma's Equity Index



The City of Tacoma's strategic plan includes an [interactive Equity Index map](#) that enables our community to assess the availability and condition of resources recognized in social science studies as influential to one's ability to succeed in life. The five categories include: Accessibility, Economy, Education, Livability, and Environmental Health.

Using the map, Metro Parks focused our Equity Emphasis Team at nine parks with lower equity index ratings. Improvements included removal of a failing irrigation system and improved landscaping outside Eastside Community Center, as well as playground improvements and repairs at eight other South and East Tacoma parks.

Piloted a real-time service via phone to enhance customer service

Recognizing the barriers and challenges that language can create for those whose primary language is something other than English, our customer service staff now have access to virtually connect with live interpreters speaking every language who can help bridge communication gaps when needed.

Revved up the quality of Gas Station Park to create more dynamic experiences for kids and neighbors

Together with the City of Tacoma and fueled by the advocacy of the South End Neighborhood Council (SEnCo), Metro Park completed the transformation of an abandoned gas station site that once stood as a blighted and toxic eyesore. Funded by our 2014 Bond, with partner support from the City and State, and driven by a neighborhood inspired vision, Metro Parks created dynamic neighborhood park with play features for kids of all ages, picnic spaces and a playful tricycle traffic garden with mini stop signs and a play filling station where young riders' imaginations can roam freely.

Expanded the Zoo field trip scholarships to benefit more students from low-income schools

More than 1,000 students from low-income public schools enjoyed a complimentary field trip to Point Defiance Zoo in the 2022-23 school year. Under the new expanded scholarship program launched this fall, schools where at least 60 percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch are eligible for full field trip scholarships. Low-income schools with 40-59 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch are eligible for partial scholarships.



Metro Parks Equity Emphasis Team crew members assessed and prioritized improvements at parks within low equity areas of South and East Tacoma: Alling Park, Eastside Community Center Campus, Lincoln Park/Eldridge Playfield, McKinley Park, Neighbors Park, Sawyer Tot Lot, South Park, Verlo Playfield, Wapato Park.

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South & East Tacoma Parks prioritized for improvements

MORE THAN \$200,000

Parks received site furnishing updates, landscape improvements, playground and irrigation repairs



“The transformation of Gas Station Park far exceeded our expectations as a fun and educational community gathering space. We were blown away by the transformation of the park into a super cute and fun space for our South End community to enjoy.”

❤️ SENCo





“We all have a role in creating rich, diverse, and safe spaces where youth are encouraged to play, learn, and grow. Free memberships and Late Night are excellent examples of creativity born from open dialogue. Let’s continue to push boundaries that leave an indelible impression on generations to come!”

AKEEM DAVIS
MPT Advisory Council Member



Providing Health and Wellness Opportunities and Supporting Community Safety

Health, Wellness & Safety Improve health outcomes and reduce health inequities for all who live in Tacoma; create safe spaces and programs that build a healthy and productive community.

Provided a 900 percent increase in youth access to community centers

Prior to the pandemic, fewer than 1,800 youth throughout Tacoma held a year-round membership in Metro Parks community centers. Today, more than 16,000 youth 18 and under hold a free membership granting access to any of Metro Parks' community centers.

Brought free healthy cooking demonstrations to neighborhoods throughout Tacoma

The Mobile Teaching Kitchen hit the road for the first time this year in an effort to bring healthy and affordable food options directly to neighborhoods. More than 450 people engaged with chefs during 16 cooking demonstrations in May and September, taking home recipes and Safeway gift cards.

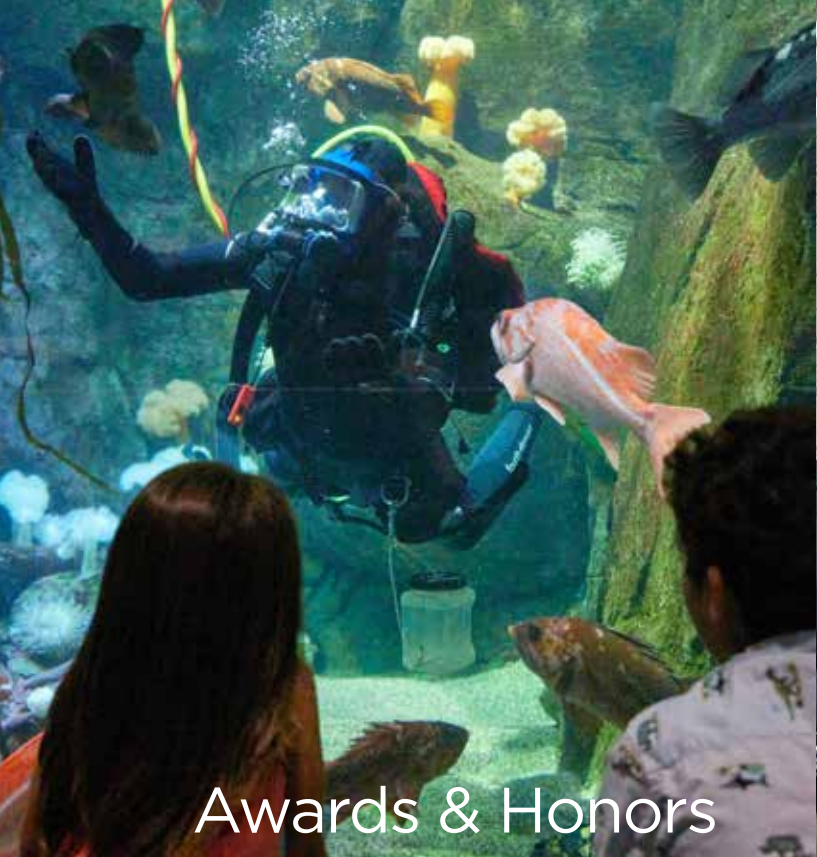
Introduced the Teen Summer Late Night program and expanded the Teen Late Night program during the school year

As a response to rising gun violence among youth, Teen Summer Late Nights formed this year to provide free dinner and safe spaces for teenagers to hang out. More than 10,170 visits were logged from June to September, with an average of 261 middle and high schoolers showing up each night across all 12 sites.

Launched a revitalized Park Guides program to better connect community to nature and enhance park safety

Four full-time guides split their time between regional and neighborhood parks providing education and information on the surrounding ecology and answering questions and concerns from park visitors. They do not act in an enforcement capacity but actively monitor the goings-on in parks, connect people to services and help with programming.





Awards & Honors



Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium wins volunteer engagement award for volunteer dive program

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium won a significant achievement award in volunteer engagement for its volunteer dive program from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. The Zoo's volunteer divers play a vital role in helping us provide high quality animal care, connect our community to nature, and protect critical species and habitats in Puget Sound.

OL Reign team honors Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium for its care and protection of nature

Seattle women's soccer team OL Reign recognized Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium for its commitment to engaging our community in the care and protection of nature, specifically the connection to climate change and sustainability. OL Reign selected the Zoo as its 2023 Community Partner in the Nationwide Community Impact Award, a season-long community-focused National Women's Soccer League initiative.

Communities for a Healthy Bay recognizes Zoo youth volunteer for his commitment to conservation

Communities for a Healthy Bay honored Zoo youth volunteer and SAMi student Gabe Gallardo for his work in inspiring people of all ages to care about – and take action to protect – marine animals and ecosystems. The Zoo's youth volunteer program provides opportunities for local high school students to share and increase their knowledge of conservation and wildlife in a supportive community.



Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium earned kudos and another five years of accreditation from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums – the “gold standard” for modern zoos and aquariums.

The Zoo has been continuously accredited by AZA since 1983.



Owen Beach wins two state awards for climate-resilient improvements

Owen Beach won two awards for a \$6.3 million project that replaced aging infrastructure and improved traffic flow with a climate-resilient design. The Washington Recreation & Park Association selected Owen Beach for a Spotlight Award in recognition of an outstanding achievement. The Washington chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects recognized Owen Beach for preserving a cultural legacy against sea level rise.

Landmarks Preservation Commission recognizes renovations at W.W. Seymour Botanical Conservatory

W.W. Seymour Botanical Conservatory won an Outstanding Achievement Award in Historic Preservation from the City of Tacoma Landmarks Preservation Commission after it reopened following a year of extensive renovations and additions. A carnivorous plant bog and vivarium with golden dart frogs and more than 200 new plants were added, along with a living wall of ferns, orchids and monstera.

2023 Board of Park Commissioners

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