

Pregnant orangutan loses baby

SEATTLE—Woodland Park Zoo is sad to share it learned today that its pregnant orangutan, Batu (bah-too), has lost the baby after carrying the fetus nearly to term. An ultrasound performed this morning during an anesthetized exam unfortunately revealed the fetus was no longer viable.

This was the first pregnancy for the 15-year-old, Sumatran orangutan and would have marked the first orangutan birth at the zoo in 35 years. Godek, also 15, was the father.

“While we always prepare for worst-case scenarios, of course, this is not the outcome we expected. We had high hopes and were so excited to welcome a healthy baby to our zoo family and for Batu to enter a new chapter of motherhood. This is a monumental loss for our zoo family and our hearts are very heavy, especially for Batu and her dedicated caretakers,” said Roger Sweeney, Chief Zoological Officer at Woodland Park Zoo.

“Up until recently we had been able to closely track the development of Batu’s fetus. The last ultrasound showed all indicators were good—the fetus was near-term and appeared to be developing well, with a normal heartbeat,” said Dr. Tim Storms, Director of Animal Health at Woodland Park Zoo.

Like all the zoo’s animals, Batu was given the choice to voluntarily participate in the non-invasive ultrasounds, which involved her presenting her belly and holding still while the ultrasound probe was applied for imaging. “Because Batu wouldn’t participate in any ultrasounds recently, we made a decision to anesthetize her this morning for evaluation by an expert consulting team of human obstetricians and radiologists. The imaging and examination immediately revealed the fetus was no longer viable and Batu had lost her baby,” added Storms. “We were able to successfully deliver the fetus without the need for surgery, which will greatly shorten Batu’s recovery.”

Batu is recovering from anesthesia in the off-view orangutan bedrooms. The orangutan care team will closely monitor her throughout the night and in the following days to make sure she recovers, remains healthy and her behaviors are normal.

The birth management plan tailored for Batu included regular veterinary check-ups in consultation with an obstetrician, ultrasound procedures to track fetal development, growth, movements, and cardiac function as well as the application of a small doppler unit to monitor the fetal heartbeat. As birth was near-term, the obstetrician had been doing in-person check-ins on a twice-weekly basis.

“Batu is known for her intelligence, confidence and independent personality. Because she’s still young, we continue to hold on to hope for a future pregnancy and successful birth. Our orangutan team will shower Batu with extra TLC in the coming days,” added Sweeney.

Just as for humans, ultrasound imaging is non-invasive, painless and safe. Ultrasounds were made possible through focused training sessions by the zoo’s orangutan care team which stem from a trusting relationship between the patient and



caretakers but are dependent on Batu's cooperation. The birth management plan also had Batu on a pre-natal diet created by a nutritionist supplemented with vitamins to help her maintain a healthy weight.

Woodland Park Zoo has been home to orangutans for more than six decades. The zoo currently has four orangutans who live in two family groups: Batu and Godek share a habitat and 35-year-old male Heran and 43-year-old female Belawan (Bela) live in the other orangutan habitat. Heran was the last orangutan born at Woodland Park Zoo in 1989; his parents have since passed away.

There are three species of orangutans that are found only in Southeast Asia: the Bornean orangutan native to the island of Borneo, and Sumatran and Tapanuli orangutans native to the island of Sumatra. A critically endangered species, orangutans belong to the family Hominidae, which includes all five great apes: gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, orangutans and humans.

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