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SENECA PARK ZOO ANNOUNCES DEATH OF YOUNG GIRAFFE CALF DESPITE EXHAUSTIVE LIFESAVING EFFORTS

Masai giraffe calf Parker Junior, died suddenly Saturday after having what appeared to be a seizure.

February 20, 2024

Seneca Park Zoo is deeply saddened to announce the death of one of the giraffe calves born in December 2023. Parker Junior, known as PJ, died suddenly Saturday after having what appeared to be a seizure.

Born to Masai giraffe Kipenzi on December 6, 2023, PJ showed signs of being lame in the left rear leg on December 24. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums Species Survival Plan Veterinary Advisors were consulted and it was agreed the symptoms indicated it was likely tendonitis, or a potential nerve issue. To allow staff to manage his treatment and healing, the Animals of the Savanna building remained closed to the public. Animal Care and Animal Health teams closely monitored and reported daily on his activity level, clinical signs, appetite, and behavior. Staff worked tirelessly to monitor and train PJ to take medications voluntarily. He received non-steroid, anti-inflammatory drugs for the swelling, and his condition was improving. Thermography showed no focal heat on PJ's joints, which can be indicative of infection. He continued to nurse well and had progressed to eating solid foods, taking grain from Animal Care staff's hands, which allowed staff to monitor him closely.

Timeline of Care

February 14, 2024: PJ was progressing well, and preliminary plans were in place to open the Savanna barn to the public, when PJ suddenly showed signs of lameness in his right rear leg. Veterinary staff again consulted with AZA Giraffe SSP experts.

February 15, 2024: PJ does not improve with anti-inflammatory medication, so antibiotics are started. Because antibiotics can cause severe disruption of the GI tract, they are not commonly used with young animals, and are primarily administered only after other treatments prove ineffective or there are very clear signs of an infection.

February 16, 2024: PJ showed further signs of decline and was sedated for blood work and x-rays and given additional broad-spectrum antibiotics, pain medication, and vitamin injections. As giraffe anesthesia carries significant risks, especially in young animals, the standard of care is to treat presenting symptoms first. Results from bloodwork and x-rays showed signs of inflammation but did not reveal an underlying cause.

February 17, 2024: Parker Junior died suddenly after veterinary teams observed what is believed to have been a seizure.

February 18, 2024: Veterinarians from the Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine performed a necropsy. The necropsy shows that PJ died from encephalitis, an infection of the tissues around the brain. Necropsy showed that the infection was also affecting multiple tissues including the liver (hepatitis) and umbilical region (omphalitis), which was surprising as there was no swelling of this area or fever upon examination. The infection appears to be bacterial; histopathology and cultures will take several weeks to confirm. Bacterial encephalitis, unlike viral encephalitis, is not contagious and is not expected to affect the rest of the giraffe tower. However, staff regularly monitors behavior, appetite, and bloodwork for any issues.

“PJ was with us for too short a time, and we are heartbroken,” said David Hamilton, General Curator. “He loved playing with Pippi and interacting with Animal Care staff. He brought us a lot of joy.”

“Our Animal Care, Animal Health, and veterinary staff were heroic in their efforts to save PJ,” said Seneca Park Zoo Superintendent Steve Lacy. “Teams worked around the clock to provide an exemplary level of care. We ask the public to please keep them in your thoughts during this difficult time.”

“As an AZA-accredited facility, the Seneca Park Zoo must adhere to AZA’s rigorous accreditation standards, which continuously evolve to ensure the best animal

wellbeing possible. The incidents involving their giraffe program are heartbreaking for the Seneca Park Zoo team and our community,” said Dan Ashe, President and CEO, Association of Zoos and Aquariums. “We are confident that the Seneca Park Zoo is taking every action to assure the care of their animals and to learn from this tragic loss.”

As announced in early 2023, adult female giraffe and mom to PJ, Kipenzi, has a squamous cell carcinoma growth on her jaw which is closely monitored by veterinary staff. There is no direct correlation from Kipenzi’s condition to PJ’s death.

“Kipenzi is defying the odds. Her tumor continues to grow, but she is still doing well overall. The location of the tumor within the jawbone prevents veterinary staff from surgically removing it,” said Dr. Chris McKinney. “Animal Care teams are using a topical medication to slow the growth of the tumor. Animal Health teams are continuing to monitor changes in her jaw with x-rays, and she is trained to participate in the process.”

Imaging shows that the inside of her mouth is still healthy. Animal Care staff can touch the tumor, which allows them to determine if there are any signs of pain.

McKinney continued, “Currently, Kipenzi can eat normally and is not showing any signs of pain. Unfortunately, while we can slow the growth of her tumor, it is not curative. The tumor is serious, and fatal. We will not let Kipenzi suffer.”

Iggy’s calf Pippi is doing well and is growing fast. She is very active and playful. We hope to introduce her to the public in the coming weeks.

Zoo staff, including Dr. Chris McKinney, Veterinarian; Steve Lacy, Superintendent; and Pamela Reed Sanchez, President and CEO, Seneca Park Zoo Society, will be available via Zoom for comment this afternoon, February 20th at 2:30 p.m. Please email communications@monroecounty.gov for the Zoom link