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Press release

Lung infection caused death of polar bear baby

Tierpark Berlin's baby polar bear died in the early hours of the morning on 2 January. An autopsy has been carried out at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research (IZW).

The autopsy shows that the 26-day-old female cub died from a lung infection. Experts at IZW and the Freie-Universität's Institute of Veterinary Pathology believe that the young polar bear choked on her mother's milk, as it is a fairly common occurrence for weakened cubs to have trouble swallowing and to accidentally inhale milk.

"The baby polar bear was fairly small and feeble from birth," says Zoo and Tierpark Director Dr Andreas Knieriem. "She then developed a lung infection, which meant that her fluid intake was reduced, resulting in dehydration and ultimately death."

The images from the surveillance camera show that the cub drank briefly from her mother Tonja one last time at around 11 a.m. on 1 January. When keepers checked the monitors on the morning of 2 January, they were saddened to discover a lifeless little body.

Following the loss of her cub, on 3 January mother Tonja was very calm and spent most of her time resting. On 5 January, Tonja decided to leave the den, and returned to the outdoor area for the first time in twelve weeks. Since 18 January, she has once again been spending her days with the cub's father Wolodja.

"Experience from polar bear breeding in zoos around the world has shown that natural rearing by the mother is best for the cubs' development," says polar bear curator Dr Florian Sicks. "Despite the well-known high mortality rate for polar bear cubs, we are allowing Tonja and Wolodja to spend time together again. They are a young couple who get along very well, and since polar bears are a threatened species, every cub is a gift. Tonja was an exemplary mother, so we still have hope that one day a healthy polar bear cub will be born here in Berlin."

Polar bears at Tierpark Berlin:

Tonja was born at Moscow Zoo on 14 November 2009.

Wolodja was born on 27 November 2011 and originates from the other Moscow Zoo



breeding group.

Polar bear births at Tierpark Berlin:

The first polar bear to be born at Tierpark Berlin arrived on 7 November 1986. The cub shared a birthday with the incumbent Tierpark director Heinrich Dathe, and was therefore named Björn-Heinrich. Björn-Heinrich died many years later on 30 June 2011 at Palić Zoo in Serbia, having fathered three offspring.

On 3 November 2016, the Tierpark's first polar bear cub in 22 years was born. Little Fritz achieved nationwide fame before he and his mother Tonja had even left the birthing den. He died aged just three months on 7 March 2017 from liver failure. Despite numerous tests carried out by a number of veterinary pathologists, human pathologists and forensic toxicologists, the precise cause of the liver failure could not be found. The examinations have now been concluded.

Tonja gave birth for the second time at Tierpark Berlin on 7 December 2017. Sadly, the cub died after just 26 days.