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Inmates feel better, too, after helping ill turtles

Prison inmates are nursing ailing, endangered pond turtles back to health in a program that appears to be helping turtles and inmates feel better.

By [Paige Cornwell](#)
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The 10 western pond turtles all have shell disease. The disease eats away at the bottom of their shells, often preventing them from reproducing. Eventually, it kills them.


These creatures, listed as endangered by the state, have been in captivity for more than a year. But the people nursing them back to health are not veterinarians or conservationists. They're inmates.

Jamar Glenn is serving a 19-year, 11-month sentence for second-degree murder at Cedar Creek Corrections Center, a minimum-security prison in Littlerock, Thurston County. Timothy Nuss is serving 4½ years for robbery.


On Thursday, the inmates will help release the 10 turtles into the South Puget Sound area. It will be a high point in the Sustainability in Prisons Project's (SPP) turtle and frog program, in which inmates, in addition to healing turtles, raise Oregon spotted frogs.

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Tiffany the turtle, with a tracking device attached to it, appears ready to return to the wild Thursday from Cedar Creek Corrections Center, where Tiffany and nine other ailing western pond turtles were cared for in a program staffed by prison inmates.

The SPP, a partnership founded by the state Department of Corrections and The Evergreen State College, works to bring science and nature into prisons. The programs are in all 12 Washington prisons, and since SPP's formal inception in 2008, they have spread to other states.

On Wednesday, Glenn and inmate Timothy Nuss were preparing for the release of their charges. The turtles stay in tanks in an area the inmates have dubbed "T-Town," and each turtle is named after an SPP or corrections-center administrator.

The two wonder how the turtles will fare in the wild, they said.

"We're kind of like expectant fathers," Nuss joked as he held Tiffany the turtle.

Glenn wonders the same thing about himself, he said. He's scheduled to be released in 18 months, which, after 17 years, feels like a short time.



Inmates feel better, too, after helping ill turtles: Jamar Glenn, left, and Timothy Nuss praise the prison program that matched them with ailing turtles. "It's been one of the coolest things I've been a part of," says Glenn. Photo by Mark Harrison / The Seattle Times.

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Each day, starting at 7:30 a.m., the two inmates cleaned the turtles with a toothbrush and baby wash, gave them a 20-minute iodine bath and fed them. They recorded the daily care for each turtle and gave it to Fiona Edwards, a graduate research assistant at Evergreen.

She doesn't view Glenn and Nuss as former criminals, she said. She sees them as the people who work with the animals every day.

"You would never think we could come to prison and do something good like this," said Nuss. "You get to be involved in something bigger than you, bigger than your crime."

The program participants are doing important work in helping heal the turtles while researchers and conservationists work to learn more about shell disease, said Penny Becker of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, which is also involved with the project.

"In maintaining the healing process, these guys are a huge help," Becker said.

And the program has helped the inmates, too. Glenn hopes to continue working with animals when he is released.

"Who would have thought I would end up doing something like this?" Glenn asked. "It's been one of the coolest things I've been a part of. It's a way for me to give back to society."

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