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NEW ERA FOR CALIFORNIA CONDOR EMERGES WITH HATCHING OF FIRST CAPTIVE-BRED CHICK; COOPERATIVE RECOVERY PROGRAM CONTINUES PROGRESS

"The hatching of the world's first captive-bred condor is a milestone that we've been awaiting for years," said Secretary of the Interior Don Hodel on April 29, upon the announcement of the birth of the world's first captive-bred California condor. "It shows what time, patience, perseverance, and cooperation by both the public and private sectors can accomplish for endangered species." The Interior Department's U.S Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for the California condor recovery program.

The chick, named "Molloko" after an Indian word for condor, emerged at 5:38 P.M. PDT on April 29 at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, marking what scientists hope will be a turning point in efforts to restore this critically endangered species.

The chick hatched after a 56-day incubation at the zoological park. The young condor is the offspring of a pair of adult condors at the facility that were captured from the wild in 1985. Veterinarians said the chick's condition was good and that the bird was active and strong after attendants removed the last bits of shell fragments and helped it emerge from the egg 61 1/2 hours after it first started pecking at its shell. The chick weighed 6 3/4 ounces; it will take at least a month before its sex will be known, when blood tests will be performed.

"This small chick represents a big step back from the brink of extinction and a big step forward for recovery of the California condor," Hodel said.

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"I congratulate the San Diego Wild Animal Park on this historic event," said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Frank Dunkle. "Working under a Federal permit to keep the birds, it has used its resources and support from the State of California to make this event possible. Its expertise and commitment, like that of the Los Angeles Zoo and our other cooperators, is vital to making the condor recovery program a success.

"Successful breeding in captivity is essential to the Fish and Wildlife Service's plans to reestablish a wild population of condors" Dunkle said. "At the same time, before release of condors back into the wild within perhaps 5 years, progress has been made toward providing habitat protection, refining reintroduction methods, and addressing potential threats to their survival in the wild."

On April 19, 1987, the last known free-flying condor was captured on Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge. It was the result of a decision by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the State of California that the species' best hope for recovery was through captive propagation and future reintroduction into the wild. In addition to the new chick, there are 27 California condors in existence; 14 now are housed in breeding facilities at San Diego and 13 in similar facilities in Los Angeles.

Under the Endangered Species Act, the Fish and Wildlife Service has overall responsibility for the California condor recovery program. In conducting the recovery program, the Service works closely with other Federal agencies, the California Department of Fish and Game, and experts from private organizations. The San Diego Wild Animal Park and the Los Angeles Zoo have been instrumental in captive-breeding operations and in maintaining the captive flocks in a healthy condition.

Criteria for the release of condors developed by the California Condor Recovery Team, a scientific advisory body to the Fish and Wildlife Service, have been approved by the Service and the California Department of Fish and Game. These criteria provide for initial releases, under certain conditions, of the offspring of those birds now held in captivity when they reach fledging age. The conditions are designed to ensure: 1) maintenance of a diverse gene pool among the captive birds to ensure the continuation of a successful breeding program; 2) availability of at least three birds suitable for release; and 3) the existence of at least three pairs successfully reproducing in captivity. Experts estimate these conditions could be met as early as 1993.

Habitat protection is another important factor in preparing to reestablish a wild condor population. With the purchase of a key parcel in 1987, the Fish and Wildlife Service's condor refuge, Bitter Creek, now totals approximately 13,600 acres. Located in Kern County in southern California, these rugged hills once were a prime foraging area for condors and the site of some of the largest concentrations of condors observed in recent times. As recently as 1982, 14 birds were observed at one time in the area. The refuge will be managed by the Service to provide secure foraging habitat for the birds after their release.

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While biologists rate Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge as one of the most important habitat areas within the bird's recent range, it alone is not large enough to support a future population of condors. In addition to Bitter Creek, two other national wildlife refuges in California--Hopper Mountain and Blue Ridge--are dedicated to condors.

To test potential release sites and techniques, the Fish and Wildlife Service is considering an experimental "release-study-recapture" program using Andean condors. Beginning this summer, the Service proposes to release 10 to 20 young, female, captive-born Andean condors within the recent range of the California condor. The birds would be recaptured at the end of the 2-year study. Only female birds will be used in order to guard against reproduction by this temporary, experimental population of non-native birds.

The condor once soared in the skies from Florida to British Columbia; in fact, fossil condors recently were discovered in New York State. However, within the past century its range has been restricted entirely to California. From a population estimated at 60 to 100 birds in the 1940's, the condor continued to decline precipitously despite the best efforts of conservationists to protect and enhance their numbers.

Before 1985, biologists had hoped to use surplus birds produced by a captive breeding colony to supplement the wild population. However, following the loss of four out of five remaining wild breeding pairs in the winter of 1984-85, it became clear that the small remaining condor population likely would not survive much longer in the wild at that time.

"This chick represents a new future for the California condor. And it is a future brighter because dedicated private, state, and Federal conservationists are working together on many fronts to make it so," said Dunkle.

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NOTE TO EDITORS ONLY: Photographs and videotapes of the world's first captive-produced California condor are available from Tom Hanscom at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, telephone 619-747-8702.