

NEWS RELEASE

717 General Booth Blvd. Virginia Beach, VA 23451



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Mackenzie Di Nardo | MDiNardo@VirginiaAquarium.com

May 19, 2022

Vulnerable Crocodylian Species Lays Eggs at Virginia Aquarium

(Virginia Beach, VA) – Sommer, a 16-year-old Tomistoma (freshwater crocodylian species), has laid 19 eggs at the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center. Native to Malaysia and Indonesia, the species is at high risk of extinction. Therefore, the prospect of this reproduction marks a commemorative milestone for the Virginia Aquarium and the Tomistoma Species Survival Plan (SSP), an Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) conservation program that manages breeding, research, and field projects with the goal to maintain a healthy and self-sustaining population.

The Virginia Aquarium's husbandry team excavated the eggs on Thursday, May 12, and transferred them to incubators for temperature and humidity control with hopes of generating a higher hatching success rate. Both Sommer and her partner Ralf (male) are in the early stages of adulthood which means it is unclear whether they have reached sexual maturity and are reproductively viable. The eggs Sommer laid in 2019 and 2020 were infertile. Oval and evenly rounded, Sommer's latest clutch will be monitored closely for an 80- to 120-day incubation period. If the eggs fully develop, hatchlings will likely stay at the Aquarium for the first year to monitor their health. In the meantime, the Aquarium will coordinate with Tomistoma SSP partners to locate qualified caretakers.

Born in Malaysia, Ralf and Sommer were acquired by the Virginia Aquarium in October 2015. At the time, they were the first legally imported Tomistoma in the U.S. since 1973. Tomistoma are the least studied of the 23 different types of crocodylians found around the world, due to their remote and inaccessible habitat, but some estimates show only 2,500 remaining in the wild. Tomistoma are listed as vulnerable on the International Union of Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species and listed as endangered according to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Population threats include habitat destruction, drowning in fishing nets, and overfishing of food resources.

"This event is an important milestone for Tomistoma conservation efforts in the United States," says Colin Walker, Assistant Curator of Fishes, Herpetology, and Invertebrates at the Virginia Aquarium. "As Ralf and Sommer were the first legal imports from a home-range country in nearly 50 years, any offspring they produce will greatly contribute to the long-term sustainability of genetic diversity in the American population of this little known but charismatic crocodylian species. Nest attrition can be high, particularly with younger females, but we are cautiously optimistic for the future of this clutch."

The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center has an extensive history with field and conservation research on these animals. The Aquarium is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) as well as a participating member of the AZA Crocodylian Taxonomic Advisory Group.

Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center

The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums. The Aquarium is also a member of World Association of Zoos and Aquariums. The Virginia Aquarium's mission is to inspire conservation of the marine environment through education, research, and sustainable practices. It is located at 717 General Booth Boulevard, just south of Rudee Inlet in Virginia Beach.

The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, supports the work of the Virginia Aquarium. The Foundation procures and maintains the Aquarium's exhibits, including the animals and habitats. It is also responsible for annual and capital fundraising, administration and funding for the Virginia Aquarium Stranding Response Program, conservation and scientific research efforts, and the Aquarium's mission-related education programs. You can be a part of our mission by making a [tax-deductible donation](#) to support our programming.

#