

**For Immediate Release:**

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## **Not Like Mary's Little Lamb Happy Hollow Welcomes Navajo Churro Sheep, America's First Sheep**

*San José* - Happy Hollow Park & Zoo is pleased to welcome four rare Navajo Churro Sheep to its Zoo family. The adult female Yazhi, who's name is Navajo for *Little One* and nine month-old twins Hogan, who's name means *home* and Diyogi, the word for *weaving*, came from the Santa Ana Zoo. Sergei, the adult male, came from a private breeder in Southern California.

The Navajo were responsible for saving the sheep from extinction after the U.S. government conducted stock reductions, wiping out roughly 30% of each household's stock during the 1930's. The Navajo acquired a few 'old style' sheep, which they nurtured into thousands. The animals were prized for their wool, which was used for weaving. The Navajo maintained original flocks in isolated areas where no other sheep breeds were introduced. By the 1970's the "old style" sheep had dwindled to less than 500 individuals. In 1977 the Navajo Sheep Project was started to save the breed from extinction and today approximately 5000 sheep are registered.

"This is a rare chance to show our guests that even domesticated animals have the potential to become an endangered, if not extinct, species," says Valerie Riegel, Zoo Curator. "Many people don't realize the importance of maintaining heritage breeds like the Navajo Churro Sheep. Heritage breeds form the backbone upon which our modern breeds are based. Another example of heritage species would be heirloom tomatoes and heritage roses valued for their diversity and genetic strength."

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Navajo Churro sheep are descended from an ancient Iberian breed and were the very first breed of domesticated sheep in the New World. The history of the Churro importation and distribution is fascinating and complex. Its importation by the Spanish dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century where it was used to feed and cloth the armies of the conquistadors and Spanish settlers. The sheep's history is intertwined with Ranchers throughout the Southwest; mining towns in Mexico and in 1849 when gold was discovered in California, churros were trailed west to feed the Gold Fever.

Guests can meet Sergei, Yazhi and twins Hogan and Diyogi daily from 10 -5 at Happy Hollow Zoo. For more information and photo opportunities, please call Vanessa Rogier 408-277-3065. Digital images can be provided upon request.

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