

Monterey Bay Aquarium's top 10 legacies, so far

Leigh Cooper 3:23 p.m. PST December 5, 2014



(Photo: Provided/Monterey Bay Aquarium)

The twirls and twists of a diving sea otter. The squeal of children as the wave in the Splash Zone crashes over their heads. The slow, rhythmic pulse of moon jellies. Whatever their memories, visitors to the Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey walk away with an appreciation for the exotic world hidden under the ocean's waves.

Thirty years after the aquarium opened its doors, Jim Covell, director of training and interpretation, reflected on memories from his 27 years at the aquarium and what he considers the top 10 legacies of the aquarium.

1) Practice makes perfect

The aquarium is proud to continually create new special exhibits ever since its 1988 "Whalefest" celebrating gray whales. Temporary exhibits display new animals for returning guests, test the popularity of new creatures, and provide an opportunity for the aquarium to learn novel animal-care techniques.

For example, "Marketing kept asking, 'Is anybody really going to come down here and see a bunch of slimy things that sting?'" Covell said of the aquarium's first jellyfish exhibit. "And people went wild for it."

Now, the aquarium has created multiple jellyfish exhibits including the current "The Jellies Experience." They are also an industry leader in the care of jellies, Covell said.

2) Serengeti of the Sea

In 1992, the aquarium celebrated the creation of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Extending over an area larger than five Yosemite National Parks, the sanctuary houses 34 marine mammal species, more than 180 types of birds, 525 fish species, and a swarm of invertebrates and algae.

"I think it's fair to say that the aquarium helped put Monterey Bay on the map for millions of people," Covell said. "That created some momentum toward protecting it."

Aquarium staff members have continued to help create sanctuaries, including the recent overhaul of California's network of marine protected areas.

3) Seafood Watch

During its first special exhibit on conserving global fisheries in 1999, the aquarium placed placards on café tables about sustainable fisheries. "We would go back to bus the tables, and the table tents would be gone," Covell said.

Interpreting this as a sign that people wanted advice on sustainable seafood options, the aquarium started Seafood Watch. The program now includes continually updated, unique wallet cards for different U.S. regions, a sushi guide and an app.

The program recently celebrated the move of more than 20 Central Coast ground fish from "Avoid" to "Best Choices" or "Good Alternatives."

"Finally, we saw some real progress," Covell said. "In the conservation world, it's really nice to see progress once in a while, because there are so many challenges."

4) If you can help, you otter

The aquarium's Sea Otter Program has been supporting the slow recovery of the southern sea otter population since 1984. As part of the program, the aquarium has become an otter hospital and orphanage for 681 stranded otters. The adult female otters on exhibit often lend a paw by fostering young otters.

Researchers have studied the exhibit otters and followed tagged rescued otters after their release, which has allowed the researchers to document all the life stages of sea otters. "That information has helped inform better and better and better conservation efforts with otters," Covell said.

5) Mysteries of the Deep

The Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, founded in 1987 and located in Moss Landing, designs state-of-the-art technology, including deep-sea submersibles to explore the ocean.

"We have always seen ourselves as part of the education outreach for MBARI, because we have access to such a large audience," Covell said. "We take the amazing stuff their scientists are doing and get that out to the general public."

The aquarium plans to open a new exhibit called "Mission to the Deep" in spring 2015. The audio-visual tour of the Monterey Canyon, an underwater canyon near Moss Landing, features animals of the deep and MBARI's tools for exploration.

6) Image makeover for Great White Sharks

Great white sharks are notoriously poor eaters in aquariums and had never been successfully hosted in an aquarium. But, the aquarium wanted to house a great white to educate the public about these massive predators and for researchers to monitor. After years of studying young great whites in a net pen in Santa Monica Bay as part of Project White Shark, they found the perfect candidate. "It was a fabulous eater and feisty," said Covell.

The young female moved in during 2004, and her first meal brought tears to the eyes of the scientists. A million visitors viewed that first white shark before she was released. "You could see instantaneously visitors' image of what a white shark was change," Covell said.

7) Part of the community

The aquarium has put down deep roots in the Monterey Bay area by hosting more than 2 million students, teaching workshops and mentoring programs. Covell highlighted the aquarium's volunteer program. Since 1984, 8,500 volunteers have completed more than 3.2 million hours of service at the aquarium. Volunteers include exhibit guides, divers, animal caregivers and even otter spotters, explained Covell.

"We have had people come from aquariums all over the world to look at our volunteers, and how we find them, how we train them, how we organize them," he said.

8) Shark fin soup education

During its 30-year tenure, the aquarium has stepped up to the political plate to help shape ocean conservation legislature. For example, in 2011, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill banning the trade of shark fins within California – a bill promoted by the aquarium. The aquarium educated politicians and Californians about the effects on ocean food chains and shark populations of slaughtering 100 million sharks every year, Covell said. Other states, including Hawaii, Washington and Oregon, have passed similar laws, but the large Asian population in California provided a big market for the fins, which are used in shark fin soup.

9) The big picture

Walking through early aquariums, visitors would have found many small tanks containing a single species of marine life in each. The large acrylic windows that allow for large tanks had just been developed when the aquarium was being built. This new technology allowed the design team to create big windows into underwater worlds. "It gave people a big-picture look into the oceans," said Covell. "We set a trend there."

The aquarium also was the first major aquarium to display marine life communities in their natural habitats. The designers wanted guests to experience entire ocean ecosystems instead of just fragments.

10) Ambassador Makana, an albatross, promotes change

The aquarium's mission is to inspire conservation of the oceans. To succeed, it needs to educate people about human impacts on oceans and provide solutions to conservation issues. "People want to do good stuff. They want to help the oceans," Covell said.

One of the aquarium's most successful ambassadors for change is Makana, a Laysan albatross. Visitors meet Makana and learn how marine birds fill their bellies with floating plastic trash. Consequently, they feel full, don't eat fish and starve. The guests also learn they hold the solution, because humans are the source of the plastic, explained Covell.

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