



NORTH CAROLINA
AQUARIUM
SOCIETY

ANNUAL REVIEW 2024



2024 STATISTICS

Fort Fisher



464,197 visitors
26,003 Students Hosted
594 Volunteers
22,525 Volunteer Hours

Roanoke Island



319,550 visitors
9,139 Students Hosted
199 Volunteers
17,622 Volunteer Hours

Pine Knoll Shores



382,398 visitors
23,840 Students Hosted
195 Volunteers
15,518 Volunteer Hours

Jennette's Pier



163,260 visitors
9,725 Students Hosted
12 Volunteers
1,051 Volunteer Hours

LETTER FROM THE SOCIETY PRESIDENT & BOARD CHAIR



Liz Baird, President & CEO



Drew Covert, 2023-25 Board Chair

Thanks to your support, we have had an incredible year! From hosting over 60,000 students to installing wildlife-friendly lighting at Jennette's Pier and securing support for the expansion and renovation of the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher, we've made significant strides in conservation, education, and visitor experience.

Our strategic initiatives continue to pave the way for meaningful change, enhancing both our environmental efforts and visitor engagement. None of this would

be possible without the dedication of our staff, volunteers, visitors, members, donors, and Board. Your contributions—whether through memberships, donations, or gift shop purchases—play a vital role in supporting initiatives ranging from aquaculture to accessibility.

Looking ahead, we're excited to launch our transformational project at the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher, as well as numerous enhancements at the NC Aquariums at Pine Knoll Shores, on Roanoke Island, and Jennette's Pier. We're thrilled to invite the public to be part of this exciting journey. Stay tuned for ways to join us in shaping the future of aquatic conservation and education!



BIRDS OF A FEATHER: EXPANDING BIRD CONSERVATION AT THE NC AQUARIUMS

While the NC Aquariums are known for their dedication to aquatic life, their commitment to conservation extends beyond the water. Birds are a vital part of any ecosystem, and each NC Aquarium location is doing its part to help save birds through bird-friendly initiatives.

Preventing Bird Window Collisions

At the NC Aquariums at Pine Knoll Shores and Fort Fisher, bird-safe window clings were recently installed to prevent native songbirds from colliding with the Aquariums' glass windows. While humans can use context clues like door frames to avoid running into transparent glass, birds lack the ability to understand that the reflection they see in a glass window or door isn't just more open space. According to researchers at the Smithsonian, glass collisions could kill up to 1 billion birds annually, meaning that addressing this issue is an important step in bird conservation.

There are two basic strategies for preventing deadly bird window collisions. The first is to prevent the bird from reaching the window. The second strategy is to make a bird "think" that the area they are seeing as a clear opening is crossed with obstructions (i.e., branches, trees, etc.) which are too close to fly through. Given the difficulties with the first strategy, the NC Aquariums opted to install window film systems that can accomplish the second strategy.

The NC Aquariums are a partner organization of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Saving Animals From Extinction North American Songbirds (SAFE NAS) program. The goal of SAFE NAS is to reduce threats to North American songbirds and secure sustainable wild

populations of these species throughout their ranges. As a partner organization, the Aquariums have a responsibility to design bird-friendly exhibits or address the issue of collisions of wild birds. Window film systems are a simple and affordable strategy to retrofit older or already established buildings and send a powerful conservation message.

Partnering Locally to Save Habitats Globally

Meanwhile, at the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher, conservation efforts extend to what's in your cup. The Aquarium Gift Shop now offers certified Smithsonian Bird Friendly coffee, thanks to a partnership with North Carolina-based Larry's Coffee. These special blends, available for purchase at the Aquarium, directly support conservation efforts while ensuring coffee is grown in habitats that preserve tree cover, biodiversity, and natural ecosystems.

Typical growing practices surrounding coffee and other commercial crops like cocoa can endanger bird species by destroying forest habitat or not retaining enough biodiversity in the area. However, the bird friendly farms that coffee like Larry's is grown on helps retain habitat for birds and are also 100% organic certified, meaning guests can feel great about the coffee they purchase at the NC Aquariums being both delicious and good for the environment.

Through these initiatives, the NC Aquariums continue to expand their role in protecting wildlife—not just underwater, but in the skies as well.



PROTECTING SEA TURTLES: NC AND BEYOND

Sea turtles are not only found along North Carolina's coast, they occur worldwide. They face threats from the time they hatch through adulthood. The North Carolina Aquariums are working locally, and internationally, to help protect these remarkable creatures.

Wildlife-Friendly Lighting

To safeguard wildlife, Jennette's Pier installed 200 brand-new exterior light fixtures, including bollards and lampposts, using wildlife-friendly lighting. These fixtures emit shielded, amber light that is significantly less disruptive to nesting and hatching sea turtles along the coast.

Sea turtle hatchlings rely on natural light from the night sky, including the moon and stars, to navigate toward the ocean. Artificial lighting such as streetlamps, parking lot lights, ocean-facing porch lights, and pathway lights can disorient them, leading them away from the water. This misdirection puts them at risk of predation by crabs and raccoons, road accidents, or death from exposure and dehydration. By using wildlife-friendly lighting at the Pier, we are helping our local hatchlings safely make their way to the sea.

Rescuing Cold-Stunned Sea Turtles

North Carolina's fall and winter seasons bring dramatic temperature fluctuations, which can cause ocean and sound water temperatures to drop suddenly. This leads to cold-stunning events, a hypothermia-like condition that affects sea

turtles before they can move to warmer waters. The number of cold-stunned turtles we see in North Carolina varies each year based on weather patterns.

This past year, the NC Aquarium on Roanoke Island received 778 cold-stunned sea turtles. So far, they have successfully rehabilitated and released 577 sea turtles back into the wild. The Sea Turtle Assistance and Rehabilitation Center (STAR Center) at the Aquarium coordinated an extensive response involving more than 135 staff and volunteers. They managed intake, care, and transportation for affected sea turtles, including North Carolina's most common species: loggerhead, green, and Kemp's ridley turtles.

The rescue effort relied on a vast network of participants, including those handling logistics, veterinary support, and transportation. Volunteers assisted with critical tasks, from setting up rehabilitation basins and providing medical care to coordinating offshore releases. We are grateful to our partner organizations for their assistance during this incredibly challenging event.

Sea turtles in North Carolina are protected under the Endangered Species Act and are managed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC). The NC Aquarium on Roanoke Island operates under NCWRC Sea Turtle Permit #24ST46.

International Conservation Partnerships

In August 2024, the NC Aquarium Society led a members' trip to Costa Rica, focusing on sea turtle conservation. Participants worked with the Latin American Sea Turtle (LAST) Association in the Golfo Dulce, a crucial foraging area for sub-adult and adult sea turtles. This region, including Playa Blanca on the Osa Peninsula, is a biodiversity hotspot supporting various marine and terrestrial species.

The team's primary objective was to study hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and Eastern Pacific green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*). They conducted in-water research, monitoring feeding habitats to collect data on population structure, genetic origin, health status, and habitat usage. Additionally, they assisted with habitat restoration, planting mangrove propagules in specific locations along the shore.

Turtle fieldwork included monitoring gill nets set up for research. Once a turtle was caught, team members worked swiftly to transport it back to shore for assessment. The turtles were checked for flipper and PIT tags, biometric data were collected, and tissue and blood samples were taken before releasing them back into the ocean. The team worked with both species of turtles and were able to use a database of information to see the growth and health of those individuals. Similar to the STAR Center, the LAST Association operates a rescue and rehabilitation facility, which has successfully rehabilitated and released over 100 sea turtles since its establishment in 2011.

The Sea Turtle SAFE Program

Since 2018, the Sea Turtle SAFE (Saving Animals From Extinction) Program (STSP) has united the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) community to ensure the survival of all sea turtle species. The current five-year plan (2024-2028) prioritizes two of the most critically endangered sea turtles: the Kemp's ridley and the Eastern Pacific leatherback.

The NC Aquariums have taken a leading role in the STSP Adopt a Beach project, which protects Eastern Pacific leatherback nesting sites from egg-laying through hatchling emergence. In addition, the program funds small grants supporting conservation, education, and research efforts to bolster Kemp's ridley and Eastern Pacific leatherback sea turtle populations.

Through the STSP, the NC Aquariums demonstrate their commitment to global sea turtle conservation. This collective initiative with AZA partners helps make a tangible impact on two of the most imperiled sea turtle populations in the world.

A Commitment to Conservation

From wildlife-friendly lighting to large-scale rescue operations and international partnerships, the NC Aquariums are at the forefront of sea turtle conservation. Their dedication ensures that these incredible marine creatures continue to thrive for generations to come. Whether through habitat-friendly infrastructure, hands-on rescue efforts, or scientific research, the Aquariums' commitment to sea turtle conservation remains unwavering.

IN MEMORIAM: DICK FUTRELL (1931-2025)



Throughout his life, Dick Futrell served his community and state with enthusiasm and success, including as a dedicated and influential member of the NC Aquarium Society Board of Directors for over 20 years.

A native of eastern North Carolina, Futrell's long and successful banking career, concluding with his role as CEO of Centura Bank, led to him being inducted in the NC Bankers Association Hall of Fame. In addition to his success in banking, he gave freely of his time and talent to help improve his state. Beyond his work with the Aquariums, he served as a budget director of North Carolina under Governor Jim Hunt and was Chairman of the NC Port Authority.

Futrell had a quick wit and enjoyed a good time with his many friends. A recipient of the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, his Aquarium Society Board colleagues describe him as "a great citizen of North Carolina." Jonas Richard "Dick" Futrell, Jr., passed away on January 26, 2025, at the age of 93. He will be deeply missed.



ACCESSIBILITY FOR EVERYONE

The Aquariums are committed to ensuring their facilities are accessible to all visitors, whether they have physical disabilities or invisible disabilities—conditions that may not be outwardly visible but can impact movement, senses, or daily activities. To support inclusivity, the Aquariums have implemented various accessibility features and provide staff with specialized training to enhance every guest's experience.

Physical Accessibility

At both the Aquariums and Jennette's Pier, facilities and grounds have been designed to accommodate visitors with limited mobility. Key features include:

- **Automated entry doors** that open with the push of a button.
- **Ramps and elevators** for easy navigation between floors.
- **Aluminum handrails** throughout the premises for additional support.
- **Spacious, ADA-compliant restrooms** with wide stalls for accessibility.
- **Complimentary wheelchair loans** for guests who need them.

Jennette's Pier, with its unique coastal setting, offers additional accommodations:

- **Lowered handrails** at two prime fishing spots, making it easier for wheelchair-seated anglers to cast their lines.
- **Free golf cart rides** from the parking lot to assist with mobility.
- **A Mobi-mat** deployed for most of the year, providing an accessible path from an easy-access ramp to the beach.
- **A beach wheelchair with ballooned tires** available for loan, allowing visitors to explore the sandy shoreline.

Supporting Guests with Invisible Disabilities

For many, visiting the Aquarium is a magical experience, from the excitement of watching playful otters to the wonder



of touching stingrays to the awe of seeing sharks glide through the Ocean Gallery. However, for individuals with sensory sensitivities, these environments can be overwhelming.

To create a more inclusive experience, all Aquarium locations partner with **KultureCity**, a leading nonprofit in sensory accessibility and inclusion. Through this collaboration, the Aquariums provide:

- **Sensory signage**, such as "Headphone Zone" for loud areas and "Quiet Spot" for calm spaces.
- **Sensory bags** equipped with noise-canceling headphones, fidget items, a weighted lap blanket, a visual cue card for communication, and a "KultureCity VIP" ID card.
- **Social stories**, an online guide with pictures and text to help visitors prepare for their visit.

Dementia-Friendly Certification

In addition to supporting guests with sensory challenges, staff and volunteers recently received training from the **Dementia Friendly Coalition**. This program educates businesses and employees on the challenges faced by individuals with dementia and provides strategies for compassionate assistance. As a result, the Aquariums and Jennette's Pier proudly display the **purple seahorse certification emblem** on their entry doors, signaling to caregivers and families that these locations are committed to offering a welcoming, supportive, and inclusive environment.

Through thoughtful design, staff training, and strategic partnerships, the Aquariums and Jennette's Pier continue to enhance accessibility for all visitors, ensuring that everyone can enjoy an enriching and memorable experience.

CAMPAIGN FOR THE NC AQUARIUMS EARLY INVESTORS

Donors as of
February 1, 2025

\$1,000,000+

The Endowment
SECU Foundation

\$500,000+

Bruce Barclay Cameron
Foundation
Dickson Foundation
FotoFX
Bill and Agnes Monk Family
Aurelia & William Monk, Molly Monk
Eddie and Jo Allison Smith Family
Foundation
Southern Bank Foundation
Sydney & David Womack

\$100,000+

Cannon Foundation
Dowd Foundation

Mount Olive Pickle Company
Foundation
Orton Foundation
Stewart & Peter DiFiore

\$50,000+

The Borden Family
R.A. Bryan Foundation
Olivia Holding
Adrienne Moore
James E. Moore Insurance Agency
W. Trent Ragland Jr. Foundation
Jacque & Wes Seegars
Triad Foundation

\$10,000+

Anonymous
Sally & Harry Archer
Liz Baird
Lyndi & Rowland Barker
Georgia & Bill Belk
Marianne & Bill Berry
Myra Best
Joye Blount & Jessie J. Knight, Jr.
Meredith & Jay Briley
Mary Craig & Brick Brown
Scottie & Bill Bryan
Peg & Charlton Burns
Louise & Steve Coggins
Diana Corbett & G. Dale McGee
Vickey & Drew Covert
Dominion Energy

Susan & Tom Hackney
Alice & Art Keeney
Kelly & Dave Knight
Joyce Kohn & Scott Sullivan
Town of Kure Beach
Linda & Harry MacDonald
Carol & Bob Mattocks
Vicki & Tim Milam
Robert & Carol Newcomb Family
Fund
Dana O'Donovan
Suzanne & Brian Pecheles
E.J. Pope & Son Foundation
Edythe Poyner & Steve Williams
George Smedes Poyner
Foundation
Barbara & Bubba Rawl
Jenny & Bobby Rippy
Segal Family Charities
Karen & Jon Segal
Sarah & Adam Shay
Wesie & David Sprunt
Ann & Jordy Whichard
Myrna & Rick Willetts
Hope Williams & Tom Bersuder
York Properties

\$1,000+

A.E. Finley Foundation
Deborah Albert
Bunnie Bachman
Emily & Tres Bruce

Town of Carolina Beach
Susan & Tom Braaten
Eldridge & Tom Dodson
William C. Ethridge Foundation
Becky & Charles Evans
Billie & Dick Futrell
Carolyn & Arthur Green
Nancy & Allan Harvin
Tess Judge
John, Lynn & Luisa Lee Family
Foundation
Erwin Bellamy McMerty
Foundation
Susan Moffat-Thomas & John
Thomas
James E. Moore, Jr.
Anne Kane & Travis Moser
Laura & Greg Nichols
Stewart & Wes Perry
Mary C. & Charles Pierce
Bonnie & Chuck Revelle
Anne & Jim Schout
Jody & Ronnie Sloan
Jennifer Sullivan/Hanes
Consulting
Diane & David Swain
Mary Hannah & Bill Taft
Johnny Tillett
Katharine & Daniel Whitley
Williamson Family Foundation



THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE NC AQUARIUMS: INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

For nearly five decades, the North Carolina Aquariums—located at Fort Fisher, Pine Knoll Shores, Roanoke Island, and Jennette's Pier—have captivated visitors with immersive exhibits that foster a deep appreciation for marine life and conservation. With over 1.4 million visitors annually, the Aquariums are among the state's most popular attractions. Each year, they provide educational programs to more than 50,000 students across 90 counties, strengthening their connection to our coast.

To continue inspiring wonder and advancing their mission, the NC Aquariums are embarking on a transformative investment in renovations and expansions. These enhancements will

revitalize all four locations, ensuring they remain premier destinations for education, conservation, and engagement for generations.

Enhancing Visitor Experiences and Sustainability

Planned improvements include upgraded touch habitats at Roanoke Island and Pine Knoll Shores, enhancing visitor interaction while prioritizing animal well-being. At Jennette's Pier, new solar panels and improved pathways will showcase green technologies, reinforcing the aquarium's commitment to sustainability.

The most significant transformation will take place at Fort Fisher, where a major expansion will introduce an impressive shark habitat, new touch pools, and a state-of-the-art education center. These enhancements will create immersive experiences that inspire curiosity and deepen visitors' connection to marine life.

Support for a Lasting Impact

In 2023, the North Carolina Aquarium Society launched the quiet phase of a comprehensive fundraising campaign to support these improvements. Thanks to a \$50 million commitment from the State of North Carolina and generous contributions from more than 100 donors, including

individuals, businesses, and foundations, the campaign raised over \$57.6 million by the end of 2024.

The Society is continuing its fundraising efforts for these ambitious projects through 2025, including launching a public phase to invite members, visitors, and the broader community to contribute to this historic transformation. As these projects move forward, the NC Aquariums remain dedicated to their mission: inspiring wonder, educating future generations, and conserving marine life. By investing in these vital enhancements, North Carolina is ensuring that its aquariums will continue to captivate, educate, and inspire for years to come.

SUPPORTING STATE EMPLOYEES— AND THE NC AQUARIUMS!



For 87 years, the State Employees' Credit Union (SECU) has provided state employees and their families with essential financial services. The second largest credit union in the country, it serves more than 2.8 million members. Its charitable arm, the SECU Foundation, is a 501(c)(3) organization funded by SECU member contributions. Since 2004, the Foundation has awarded over \$300 million to support high-impact initiatives across North Carolina in housing, education, healthcare, and human services.

This fall, SECU Foundation awarded a transformative \$2 million grant to the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher (NCAFF)—the largest gift in the Aquarium's history! This generous funding will support the creation of a new education center as part of NCAFF's ongoing expansion and renovation.

Recognizing the Aquarium's vital role in environmental education and conservation, SECU Foundation is investing in the future of hands-on learning. Each year, tens of thousands of students visit NCAFF on field trips, and with this gift, the Foundation is helping inspire future generations to connect with and protect our natural world.

"We are so pleased to be a part of the expansion of the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher," said SECU Foundation Board Vice Chair Mona Moon. "With the SECU Foundation grant and the support of many others in the community, this landmark Aquarium will be propelled to a world-class facility. A new education center, along with other exciting additions to be announced later this year, will allow even more visitors from across our state and beyond to engage with our coastal ecosystems and aquatic environments."

"We are grateful to the SECU Foundation for their generous contribution," said Liz Baird, President and CEO of the NC Aquarium Society. "With this investment, we will expand our ability to serve students and visitors—not just with larger spaces, but with richer educational experiences that will leave a lasting impact. This support helps us continue to provide outstanding opportunities for more people to understand and appreciate our aquatic ecosystems—and to take action in preserving them for the future."



NC AQUARIUM SOCIETY HELD FUNDS

These named funds are held in accounts at the NC Aquarium Society for the benefit of the NC Aquariums as indicated below.

Jane Smith Patterson Aquarium Scholars Fund

Named in honor of NC Aquarium Society Founding President Jane Smith Patterson, this fund supports the Aquarium Scholars program, which provides access to the Aquariums’ science and environmental educational offerings for underserved students in Title I eligible schools across North Carolina.

Tetlow and Roy Park Aquarium Legacy Fund

Through support from the Triad Foundation, the Legacy Fund helps the Aquariums develop engaging, immersive new exhibits, expand educational opportunities using technology and innovation and helps them become more self-sustaining.

Jay Barnes Fund for Exhibits

The Jay Barnes Fund benefits NC Aquariums’ exhibits departments through the purchase of equipment to support their work, such as media gear, specialized printers and fabrication tools.

Mark Joyner Fund

This fund supports the Mark Joyner Education Internship, providing a summer education intern position for a chosen college student, which rotates annually among the three Aquariums and Jennette’s Pier.

NC Aquarium Society Endowment Fund

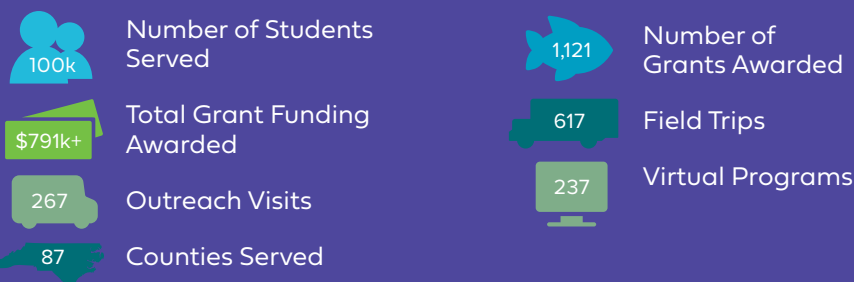
The Endowment Fund was established to generate a forward-thinking revenue stream to ensure that the Society can continue to support the work and mission of the NC Aquariums for generations to come.

AQUARIUM SCHOLARS

2024-25 Aquarium Scholar Outcomes



Cumulative Outcomes Since 2018



Founders

R.A. Bryan Foundation
Duke Energy Foundation
NC GlaxoSmithKline Foundation
Grady-White Boats
Wells Fargo Foundation

Investors

Harold H. Bate Foundation
Bill & Bob Dobo Trust
Dominion Energy Charitable Foundation
Goodnight Educational Foundation
First Citizens Bank
Allan C. & Margaret L. Mims Charitable Trust

Tetlow and Roy Park Aquarium Legacy Fund
George Smedes Poyner Foundation
Rotary Club of Kinston
Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation
Smithfield’s Chicken ‘N Bar-B-Q
Southern Bank Foundation
Triad Foundation
Walters Family Foundation
J. Tylee Wilson Family Foundation
NC Aquarium Society Board of Directors

IN MEMORIAM: JEAN KILGORE (1932-2024)



Jean Kilgore was more than a devoted community member—she was a beacon of kindness, generosity, and unwavering dedication to the causes she cherished. She was a valued member of the NC Aquarium Society Board of Directors for over 20 years.

In addition to her time spent with the Aquariums, Kilgore was also an active volunteer with the NC State University Foundation and Humanities Board, the American Red Cross, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Raleigh. She also enjoyed fishing in the Big Rock Tournament in Atlantic Beach.

Kilgore's vision for the NC Aquarium Society helped to engage the Board in its early days and support the mission of the NC Aquariums. Her Aquarium Society Board colleagues describe her as being always positive, with "a friendly smile and a laugh to share." Jean Ford Kilgore passed away on June 29, 2024, at the age of 91. She will be deeply missed.



VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: FROM HORTICULTURE TO SHELL CARTS AT PINE KNOLL SHORES

Volunteers help in almost all aspects of the Aquarium, from chopping food for the animal care team to educating visitors about animals and guiding guests around our touch pools.

Some have been volunteering for years while others have just started their volunteer adventure. Andy Wheatcraft started at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores on January 23 and is helping the horticulturist with gardening and landscaping, which is a new and much needed volunteer position for the Aquarium. He's a member of the local community and lives close enough to walk to the Aquarium.

"The Aquarium is a wonderful asset on Bogue Banks and I really enjoy giving back to our community," Wheatcraft said.

Sally Parks started volunteering the day the Aquarium reopened after being closed for renovations in 2006. She began at the shell cart, a beautiful display cart full of native

shells beachcombers can find on the shoreline. The Aquarium's database for recording volunteer hours only goes back to 2011, but since then Sally has dedicated nearly 2,000 hours of her time to inspiring guests and instilling a love of aquatic animals and habitats.

"I enjoyed talking to people about the variety of shells and about how the animals make their own shells," Parks said. She's also spent many hours at the invertebrate and sting ray touch pools. She now spends most of her volunteer time at our sea turtle cart educating guests on how everyday actions make an impact.

"I think it is important that we understand how humans affect other animals and what we can do to protect them from extinction," Parks explained. "Our actions affect so many animals that live on this planet."



NC AQUARIUMS JOIN FORCES TO ADVANCE SUSTAINABLE AQUACULTURE

In a significant step toward marine conservation, a consortium of public aquariums across the United States is collaborating to develop sustainable aquaculture programs. This initiative aims to reduce the number of fish collected from the wild for aquarium displays and educational purposes, ensuring the long-term health of marine ecosystems.

Aquaculture, the breeding and rearing of finfish, shellfish, and other aquatic organisms, plays a crucial role in conservation. For commercially valuable species, aquaculture alleviates pressure on wild populations. In public aquariums, it provides a sustainable approach to maintaining habitat populations while also serving as an educational tool to promote responsible seafood choices.

The North Carolina Aquariums have been awarded funding to enhance their saltwater fish breeding programs and

raise awareness of aquaculture's benefits. Over the next three years, they will receive a portion of a \$750,000 grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) as part of a group of seven participating facilities. This funding will enable the Aquariums at Fort Fisher, at Pine Knoll Shores, and on Roanoke Island to expand their breeding programs and increase staffing for their animal care teams.



Additionally, through a partnership with North Carolina Sea Grant, the Aquariums will engage visitors and local communities in educational initiatives about sustainable aquaculture practices.

In collaboration with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), this project aims to establish a network of public aquariums dedicated to advancing aquaculture strategies.

The participating institutions will work collectively to breed 14 marine finfish species in a sustainable manner.

The aquaculture process begins with the collection of broodstock spawn eggs, which are placed in a marine fish propagation system. During this stage algae, rotifers, and copepods are used as the food chain to nourish larval fish. The larvae hatch and grow over approximately 50 days before being transferred to grow-out systems. Once matured, the fish are either integrated into aquarium habitats for public view or sent to other institutions.

Each North Carolina Aquarium location specializes in a particular species. The North Carolina Aquariums have successfully reared (or raised) dozens of species but are currently focused on advancing techniques around unique species not previously raised in human care. In addition to

marine fish, the Aquariums also cultivate multiple species of jellyfish, corals, and live foods (or zooplankton). Additionally, the Aquariums cultivate other marine organisms such as moon jellies, lined seahorses, corals, and brine shrimp.

Through this initiative, public aquariums are not only enhancing their own sustainability but also setting a precedent for responsible marine conservation efforts. By fostering aquaculture programs, these institutions play a vital role in protecting ocean biodiversity while educating future generations on the importance of sustainable seafood choices and habitat preservation.

NC AQUARIUMS DIVER JOINS EFFORT TO RESTORE FL REEFS



Visitors to the NC Aquariums can see beautiful coral reefs in the Aquariums' habitats and learn about the importance of preserving these ecosystems. However, the Aquariums' impacts extend even beyond education about coral reefs. In August 2024, Jason Sheremeta, Assistant Dive Safety Officer at the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher, took a trip to Key Largo, Florida, to participate in coral restoration efforts with the Deepwater Conservation Initiative (DCI).

Coral reefs are vital parts of the Earth's ecosystem and, when healthy, are home to a range of marine species. Reefs are not just beautiful but also bring economic impacts due to their importance for coastal protection and opportunities for recreation. However, reefs are vulnerable to threats like climate change, pollution, and impacts from unsustainable fishing. This has led to a number of coral species being listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

As part of the Aquarium's dive team, Sheremeta has the skills needed to help coral restoration work. Divers take part in

outplanting, which is the process of re-introducing nursery grown corals back onto reefs. By doing this, reefs that have become unhealthy or damaged can be restored and given new opportunities to grow and repair themselves. Sheremeta has taken opportunities to learn coral restoration techniques used by the Coral Restoration Foundation (CRF), the largest coral reef restoration effort in the world.

"At the Aquarium, we work passionately to save species, including corals, so it was very inspirational to work with experts in coral restoration and to be part of their conservation," said Sheremeta. "It was exciting to share with our team what I learned from this unique opportunity, including the latest techniques in coral restoration as we continue our work to save reefs."



INSPIRING YOUNG MINDS: A YEAR OF STEM AT THE NC AQUARIUMS

Thanks to a generous grant from the Burroughs Wellcome Fund, the North Carolina Aquariums have been able to provide invaluable STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning experiences to youth in communities near the Aquariums and Jennette's Pier. The initiative, titled "A Year of STEM," has offered over 1,200 young participants annually the opportunity to engage in hands-on educational activities beyond the classroom.

The program specifically focuses on expanding STEM learning outside of traditional school settings, targeting youth in rural areas who may have limited access to such opportunities. By improving science literacy within these communities, A Year of STEM aims to foster a greater appreciation for conservation and sustainability.

Hands-On Learning and Career Exploration

Through a variety of interactive programs, participants have been able to explore STEM topics in dynamic ways. The initiative builds upon existing offerings, allowing youth to attend summer camps, participate in teen programs, and even take on roles as volunteers and camp counselors. Additionally, three adaptive day camp programs were designed specifically to accommodate individuals with special needs, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all learners.

The program's activities range from ambassador animal encounters and hands-on experiments to field trips exploring local habitats and visits to partner facilities. Engaging discussions with STEM professionals further enhance

participants' exposure to potential career paths in aquarium-related fields.

Increasing Accessibility and Engagement

Recognizing financial barriers that might prevent participation, the North Carolina Aquariums provided financial aid to ensure that more children could take part in the program. A special emphasis was placed on engaging

local children and members of the special needs community, alongside the influx of summer tourists.

A pre- and post-program survey demonstrated the success of A Year of STEM, revealing a significant increase in participants' knowledge of STEM career opportunities and a deeper understanding and appreciation of marine environments.

One young participant shared their excitement about the program: "It's a very fun camp that lets you see and learn about creatures that you don't commonly see. Learning about habitats, animals, conservation, environmental protection, and aquatic animal care is all important, and this camp does

an amazing job of making it fun even for those who don't like the outdoors."

With its commitment to STEM education, inclusivity, and conservation awareness, A Year of STEM at the North Carolina Aquariums is making a lasting impact on young minds, inspiring the next generation of environmental stewards and science enthusiasts.





The Aquarium Division

At the 2024 Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) conference, the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher won the Excellence in Marketing Award for its Whole Lotta Otta marketing campaign celebrating the success of its Asian small-clawed otter families with the birth of six pups.

"We were thrilled to bring home the AZA top honors marketing award as the Aquarium team has embraced the conservation focus and engaged the community in the individual actions they can take to help this species," said Deyanira Romo Rossell, the Aquarium's Communications Manager. Rossell shared that the excitement over having two births in less than a year is what gave the team the idea for Whole Lotta Otta, taking the opportunity to shine a light on the Aquarium's participation with AZA's Special Survival Plan (SSP) goals.

The NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores received the Carteret Curated People's Choice Award for the community's Favorite Local Rainy Day Activity in 2024—the fourth year in a row the Aquarium has won the award. Created by local Mary Cheatham King Real Estate, Carteret Curated is an initiative that highlights local businesses in Carteret County.

In July 2024, Jennette's Pier was awarded the Coastland Gold People's Choice Award by *The Coastland Times* for its fishing piers category. This award celebrates community members' favorite attractions and activities in the Outer Banks area.

The NC Aquariums and Jennette's Pier were also awarded TripAdvisor Traveler's Choice Awards in 2024. This award is given to attractions that are consistently ranked within the top 10% of properties on TripAdvisor. The Aquariums and Jennette's Pier are grateful to be recognized by their visitors in this way.



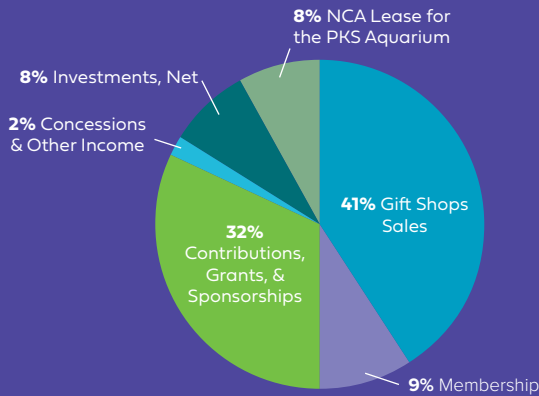
The Aquarium Society

Once again, the NC Aquarium Society was thrilled to receive exceptional ratings from two leading nonprofit evaluators. Charity Navigator again reaffirmed its four-star rating, while GuideStar again awarded the Society its Platinum Seal of Transparency. As longstanding recipients of both organizations' highest accolades, the Society is proud to continue its commitment to financial health, accountability, and transparency.

2024 Funding & Revenue

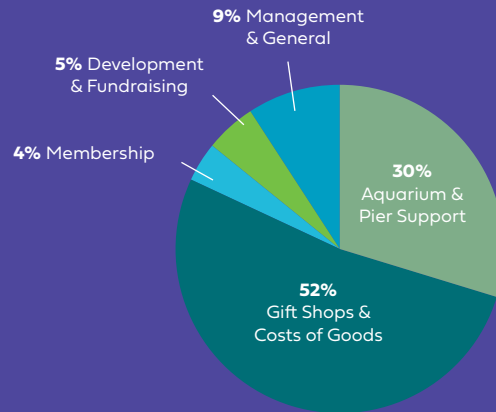
The Aquariums' and Pier's enduring success is thanks to a dedicated staff, enthusiastic volunteers, broad support from state leaders and private support made available through the Aquarium Society. Using an entrepreneurial approach, the Aquariums now fund more than half of their operational needs from earned revenue and private contributions.

2024 Aquarium Society



Revenue (Rounded)

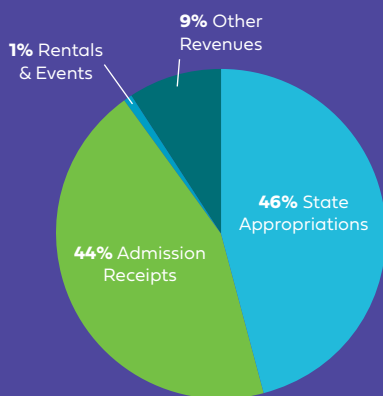
Gift Shop Sales	\$8.9 million
Membership	\$1.9 million
Contributions, Grants & Sponsorships	\$6.9 million
Concessions & Other Income	\$500,000
Investments, Net	\$1.7 million
NCA Lease for the PKS Aquarium	\$1.7 million
Total Revenue	\$21.7 million



Expenses (Rounded)

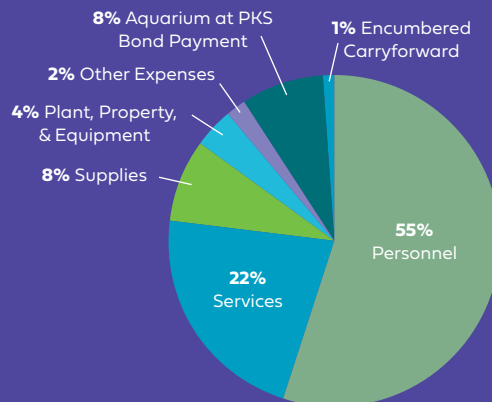
Aquarium & Pier Support	\$3.6 million
Gift Shops & Costs of Goods	\$6.2 million
Membership	\$522,000
Development & Fundraising	\$558,000
Management & General	\$1.1 million
Total Expenses	\$11.9 million

2024 NC Aquariums & Jennette's Pier



Revenue (Rounded)

State Appropriations	\$11.3 million
Admission Receipts	\$10.8 million
Rentals & Events	\$343,000
Other Revenue	\$2.3 million
Total Revenue	\$24.7 million



Expenditures (Rounded)

Personnel	\$12.6 million
Services	\$5 million
Supplies	\$1.8 million
Plant, Property & Equipment	\$1 million
Other Expenses	\$400,000
Aquarium at PKS Bond Payment	\$1.8 million
Encumbered Carryforward	\$5,400
Total Expenses	\$22.7 million



NC AQUARIUM AT FORT FISHER WELCOMES NEW OTTERS, MILLI AND BINX

The NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher (NCAFF) is home to Asian small-clawed otters, an energetic and charismatic species that captivates visitors the moment they enter the Aquarium. These attention-grabbing animals create an instant connection with guests through their mischievous antics.

At NCAFF, these otters not only entertain visitors but also help connect visitors to the story of their native North American river otter relatives, while raising awareness about global conservation needs.

A Vulnerable Species in Decline

Asian small-clawed otters, native to Indonesia, southern China, Southeast Asia, and the Philippines, face numerous threats, including habitat loss, deforestation, pollution, climate change, illegal pet trade, and poaching. Their populations are steadily declining, making conservation efforts critical to their survival.

Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) member institutions work together to set population goals and breeding recommendations to ensure a genetically diverse, demographically varied, and biologically sound population of Asian small-clawed otters in professional human care. Understanding their needs can help determine their needs in the wild and inspire people to help protect them. As part of

this program, otters are transferred between AZA-accredited facilities to maintain healthy populations.

NCAFF's original breeding pair, Leia and Quincy, had two litters in less than a year. Two females from their first litter were relocated to other AZA-accredited institutions. After the pair's success at NCAFF, they and four of their offspring moved to a new home at the North Carolina Zoo, paving the way for the arrival of two new otters—Milli and Binx.

Welcoming Milli and Binx

Milli, a 6-year-old female, arrived at the Aquarium in January 2024 from Hong Kong. She was born to parents who had been confiscated by the Hong Kong Agriculture, Fisheries, and Conservation Department, making her an important addition to the AZA breeding program due to her rare genetics.

Binx, a 4-year-old male, arrived in fall 2024 from an AZA facility in Florida as a potential mate for Milli.

Now settling into their new "Otters on the Edge" habitat, Milli and Binx are exploring at their own pace, enjoying features like a waterfall to slide down and a pond to twirl in. Their presence marks an exciting new chapter for the Aquarium's ongoing efforts to support the conservation of this vulnerable species.

AQUARIUM VOLUNTEERS RECEIVE GOVERNOR'S VOLUNTEER SERVICE AWARDS



Paul and Cathy Lesiewicz were honored with the 2024 North Carolina Governor's Volunteer Service Award for their outstanding dedication to the North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island.

For over 20 years, this husband-and-wife duo has been a vital part of the Aquarium, engaging visitors at the touch pools. Cathy is known for her enthusiastic approach at the stingray touch pool, helping guests overcome hesitation and fostering empathy for marine life. Paul captivates visitors at the invertebrate touch pools, sharing fascinating insights about native shells and their former inhabitants.



Deborah Swick also received the 2024 North Carolina Governor's Medallion Award for Volunteer Service, NC's highest volunteer honor. Swick volunteers with the marine mammal stranding program in Dare County—efforts with which the NC Aquarium on Roanoke Island and Jennette's Pier are heavily involved.

"Debbie is a very hard worker," said Marina Doshkov, Jennette's Pier Marine Mammal Stranding Coordinator. "She's always willing to help out with anything at all."

Swick is involved with a great many organizations beyond marine mammal stranding, including the Network for Endangered Sea Turtles (N.E.S.T.), and her work has been deeply impactful to conservation efforts on the coast.

Their dedication, passion, and ability to connect with visitors make these three individuals truly deserving of these prestigious awards.



CATCH AND RELEASE: EXCITING ANGLING AT JENNETTE'S PIER

In summer 2024, veteran angler George Craig of Elizabeth City caught a large tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*) at Jennette's Pier after fighting it for over an hour. In the end, the big fish swam away unharmed.

"I'm glad the fish lived, I'm very glad about that," he said. Craig thanked several of his fellow experienced anglers for all of the effort they put into assisting the fight. The anglers estimated that the fish probably weighed in between 100 to 130 pounds.

It's been years since a tarpon was caught at the Pier, and the last one on record was just half that size. Ironically, Craig also assisted in landing that previous fish!



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