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## NATIONAL AQUARIUM RECEIVES MAJOR NOAA EDUCATION GRANT TO ENHANCE YOUTH TRAINING PROGRAMS

*NOAA grant supports the Aquarium's involvement in a national coalition of Aquariums educating about climate change; furthers Aquarium's commitment to educating youth on environmental science*

October 13, 2009 – The National Aquarium has received a \$480,000 grant supporting its participation in a national coalition of Aquariums educating about climate change. The collaboration, which includes the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California and the New England Aquarium in Boston, was awarded nearly \$1.5 million by NOAA for the creation of a climate change communication program with youth training at its core. The National Aquarium will take the lead in developing a training program for youth interpreters to engage visitors in conversations about the impacts climate change has had on ocean health that will be modeled in Aquariums and informal science education institutions across the country.

Recent research (Ocean Project, 2009) indicates that climate change is the environmental issue of most concern to the public, yet most people do not associate climate change and carbon pollution with ocean health. The public expects and trusts aquariums, zoos, and museums to communicate solutions to environmental and ocean issues, and to advance ocean conservation.

“Aquariums have the unique potential to bring important environmental issues to the public in a fun and engaging way. Through our living collection of animals we can present the facts, explain the science, and motivate concern and action,” commented Nancy Hotchkiss, senior director of visitor experience at the National Aquarium. “NOAA is acknowledging this potential and giving Aquariums an opportunity to put a collective force behind the development of a consistent communication model.”

With this grant, the Aquariums will develop climate literacy among informal science educators in the following capacities:

- The **National Aquarium** will provide training and gallery activities for youth interpreters. Using interactive exhibits to create “conversation sites,” young interpreters will be able to engage visitors in conversations about climate change and ocean health;
- The **Monterey Bay Aquarium** will create a national network for training, resource sharing and support. Deliverables include an interactive website, online seminars, and an empowerment evaluation framework;
- The **New England Aquarium** will take the lead in developing materials to support exhibit interpretation. This initiative will create and disseminate a set of portable, replicable, cart-based educational activities on climate change and the oceans. These will complement and assist interpretation of aquarium live animal exhibits;
- Collectively, the Aquariums will host regional and national summits to strengthen collaboration and showcase and disseminate model programs.

The **National Aquarium** has a long term commitment to youth, and has well-developed programs that include opportunities for teens to act as interpreters and educators. A recent finding from The Ocean Project national survey (2009) indicates that the audience that is most committed to climate change literacy and action is the 12-20 year old. The grant money will provide more resources for the Aquarium to empower teens to serve as model interpreters to discuss climate change and, eventually, other environmental issues.

Each spring, the **National Aquarium's** Baltimore venue trains approximately 70 high school students to serve as interpreters, and commit more than 120 hours of direct public contact. Students come from around the state of Maryland and must pass an interview, 5 week training course, and exam before working with the public.

“The student volunteers are trained on content as well as interpretive techniques, and are a valuable part of the National Aquarium team as they mix with the “veteran” volunteers and create a new dynamic energy,” comments Nancy Hotchkiss. “All of these students volunteer because they care about the environment—climate change and the future of the planet are important to them. They are committed to telling the story of ocean health and to making a better environment in their lifetimes.”

The National Aquarium will immediately begin gathering research and developing new training materials based on interpretive techniques and messages from previous cooperative meetings. The program will be introduced to the students this spring, and extended to include fall and winter weekend work under the supervision of a youth coordinator. The students will then train the Aquarium's adult volunteers on climate change communication. In addition, the Aquarium will create a dedicated space within the exhibit gallery adjacent to the Ocean Today Kiosk that includes a 16” Magic Planet and conversation area to encourage discussions between the public and volunteer interpreters.

The strategic impact of the 3-year program developed by the Aquariums will be its potential to transform how aquariums and related informal science education institutions present the topic of climate change and the oceans and, ultimately, a model for addresses other complex environmental/science/policy topics.

For more information on the full NOAA grant, please visit NOAA's website:

[http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2009/20091005\\_aquariumgrant.html](http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2009/20091005_aquariumgrant.html)

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