

COMMITTED TO CONSERVATION

THE NATIONAL AQUARIUM IS GLOBALLY ENGAGED IN AQUATIC CONSERVATION

People's impact on the world's ecosystems is profound. Human actions have the ability to destroy or degrade habitats and species diversity, threatening the complex relationships among all living things—including humans. But we also have the ability to restore and protect our natural environment and improve the world in which we all live. Aquariums and zoos have the responsibility to increase public awareness of these challenges and possibilities, and to implement conservation action programs that advance stewardship practices.

The National Aquarium's 30 year history of conservation initiatives on the Chesapeake Bay, around the world in places like Bahamas and Costa Rica, and through its Marine Animal Rescue Program positions the National Aquarium Conservation Center to build upon a strong legacy of service to the environment. In addition to leading new research and advocacy efforts, the Conservation Center will be a voice for the Aquarium's existing conservation programs:

Chesapeake Bay Initiatives

Through exhibits and education programs, the Aquarium has been teaching people about the Chesapeake Bay for years. Located on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, the National Aquarium attracts 1.5 million visitors annually; most of these visitors reside in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The institution is well equipped through strengths in education, exhibits, programs, and information tools to promote a greater understanding of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. By communicating the problems facing the Bay, and the programs and policies designed to help it, we are in a better position to foster individual responsibility and promote the stewardship that will improve it.

Wetlands Restoration Projects are a cornerstone of the Aquarium's Chesapeake Bay Initiative. The conservation team has developed community-based programs to restore tidal wetlands. Wetlands act as refuges for birds, blue crabs, striped bass, oysters, shad, otters, and other aquatic wildlife. Wetlands throughout the Chesapeake Bay region are being damaged or lost at an alarming rate as a result of coastal development, rising sea levels, and damage from non-native species. The National Aquarium has formed partnerships with various organizations throughout the Bay region to create volunteer opportunities for the public to engage in tidal wetlands restoration through cleanups and grass plantings.

Major restoration sites include Barren Island, Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Eastern Neck Wildlife Refuge, Fort McHenry Field Days, Indian Head, and Poplar Island.

The Wetland Nursery Program has students contributing to the restoration of Chesapeake Bay watershed habitats, investigating the life cycle of plants and their importance to the estuarine ecosystem, maintaining saltwater and freshwater wetland plant nurseries, testing water quality, and gaining problem-solving skills.

Marine Animal Rescue Program (MARP)

The National Aquarium is a member of the Northeast Region of the National Stranding Network through an agreement with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service. MARP's mission is to rescue, rehabilitate and release stranded animals back into the natural environment whenever possible; share knowledge with the scientific community; and provide public educational programs through



special events and presentations. MARP staff and volunteers respond to animal strandings twenty-four hours a day in the coastal areas of Virginia, Maryland and Delaware and have returned more than 80 animals back to their natural environment.

Many of MARP's patients are sick or injured due to human-related activities like boat strikes, gear entanglement or plastic ingestion. Weather, malnourishment, exhaustion and pollution also contribute to strandings. Rescuing and studying stranded animals provides vital information about the status of the ocean and coastal environments, as well as the biology and health of the animals that live in those environments. In addition to caring for stranded animals, MARP staff and volunteers participate in the East Coast Stranding Network's annual coastal dolphin census. This census provides information to NOAA Fisheries Service on the status and health of local dolphin populations.

The National Aquarium's animal care staff ensures that animal collections are acquired through sustainable collecting practices and vendors are ecologically friendly. In addition, the Aquarium's experts are involved in a variety of projects around the world designed to restore, protect, and manage critical species:

Breeding and Animal Conservation Programs

The National Aquarium is involved in breeding programs for threatened or endangered species and helping to monitor natural populations. Current initiatives include:

- A partnership with groups in the Caribbean to protect breeding grounds for endangered leatherback sea turtles in Costa Rica.
- A partnership with Savoie Alligator Farm in Louisiana to raise American alligators at the DC venue and then release them into the wild.
- Successful breeding of Irwini's Turtle, a new rare turtle species recently found in Australia.
- Participation in conservation efforts to study, preserve, and protect the hellbender, North America's largest salamander.
- Participation in a consortium of public aquariums collaborating on coral reef conservation in the Bahamas.
- A partnership with seaturtle.org to raise young loggerhead turtles at the DC venue.

Invasive Species

The National Aquarium is leading efforts to study the invasive lion fish problem in the Caribbean along with Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

