



The undersea world of the Waikiki Aquarium

The century-old institution specializes in education and conservation

By Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Feb 22, 2009

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Dr. Andrew Rossiter learned at a young age what a wonderful teacher nature can be. He grew up in Pembroke Dock in Pembrokeshire, Wales, less than a quarter of a mile from the Celtic Sea. As a little boy, he looked forward to weekends, when his grandfather would take him on long walks along the beach and show him the tiny creatures living in the tide pools.

Once, when Rossiter was 6, they fed sea anemones morsels of cooked chicken, using matchsticks so they wouldn't get stung.

"I was mesmerized," Rossiter recalled. "Even then, I knew I wanted to have a career that involved working with animals, which eventually got narrowed down to aquatic animals, both in freshwater and in the ocean. I've had aquariums at home since I was seven."

Rossiter is beginning his fifth year as director of the Waikiki Aquarium, which opened on March 19, 1904, with 400 marine organisms in 35 tanks. Today, as the third oldest aquarium in the United States, it boasts 3,000 specimens in 45 tanks, all substantially larger than the original 35 exhibits.

Included in the Aquarium's admission price is a complimentary audio tour that introduces these fascinating creatures of the Pacific and helps raise awareness about our precious ocean resources and the importance of protecting them. Key aspects of its education efforts are 25 different classes, which are offered year-round to everyone from small fry to senior citizens.

"We're not just an aquarium, we're a valuable community resource, promoting education, research and conservation of the marine life around the Hawaiian islands," Rossiter said. "In fact, we provide more kinds of programs to more people per capita than any mainland aquarium, and our research and conservation activities are also right up there among the best."

"Marine Munchies," which reveals how various marine animals eat, is the newest addition to the current winter schedule. One highlight of this weekly 90-minute class is watching an octopus use its tentacles to unscrew the lid of a jar to retrieve a shrimp.

One of Rossiter's favorite classes focuses on coral spawning. Although rice coral is found in calm, shallow waters throughout the state, the Aquarium is one of very few easily accessible places where this annual cycle of reef reproduction can be observed up close.

"Our rice corals have spawned regularly for many years, and our biologists can now predict, with great accuracy, the days that it will happen," Rossiter said. "It occurs two to four nights after the new moon in June and July at around 9:15 p.m., and it's over in a half hour or less."

The corals release pinkish egg-and-sperm bundles that float on the surface of the water in their tanks. Aquarium researchers collect a few bundles so participants can view them under magnification. "What's truly amazing is that rice corals in the wild spawn at the same time," Rossiter said. "The date for the Aquarium's coral spawning event this year is July 23."

The aquarium launched its education programs in the late 1970s after its nonprofit support group, the Friends of the Waikiki Aquarium, was established.

"Our classes are valuable in that they teach conservation in a fun yet meaningful way," Rossiter said. "We live on islands, and our resources are limited. We talk about specific conservation challenges and our approach to sustainability."

He believes sharing knowledge is the first step. As participants learn, they realize their actions—from tossing trash in the ocean to wearing sunscreen containing harmful oils and chemicals—can have serious, long-lasting effects on marine environments.

"Our classes encourage people to think about what they can do to preserve and protect those fragile habitats," Rossiter said. "We look forward to continuing to conduct research, to educate the public, and to promote conservation of undersea life and ecosystems in the Pacific, all under the mantle of an entertaining and enjoyable visitor experience."

WAIKIKI AQUARIUM

» 2777 Kalakaua Ave.

» 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily except Thanksgiving Day (9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.) and New Year's Day (11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.). Closed on Honolulu Marathon day (Dec. 13 this year) and Christmas day.

» \$9 for adults; \$4 for youths 13 through 17; \$2 for juniors 5 through 12; free for ages 4 and younger. Kamaaina, active-duty military personnel, college students and seniors 65 and older pay \$6.

» 923-9741. E-mail: info@waquarium.org. Web site: www.waquarium.org

Notes: Special events include SeaHunt (April 4); Earth Day (April 11); Seasons and the Sea (May 2); and Ke Kani O Ke Kai (June 18, July 2, July 16, July 30 and August 13). Check the Web site for details.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS

Class schedule through March. Aquarium members receive discounts; call 440-9011 for more information.

This nocturnal quest for crabs, shrimps, eels and octopuses is perfect for adventurers aged five and older who are accompanied by an adult. From 6:30 to 9 p.m. Feb. 22, or 7 to 9:30 p.m. March 8 and 25. Costs \$12 for adult, \$10 for child.

Observe an after-hours feeding session, feed animals in the Edge of the Reef exhibit and watch sea dragons slurp up shrimp! Children must be at least 5 years old and accompanied by an adult. Every Monday (except holidays), 4:30 to 6 p.m. \$20 for adult, \$15 for child.

Spend the night with the resident monk seals, Makaonaona and Nukaau. Play a training game to learn how seals learn by operant conditioning. See the ocean through their eyes by viewing "crittercam" footage of seals hunting in the wild. Children must be at least five years old and accompanied by an adult. Evening refreshments and continental breakfast included. Takes place 7 p.m. to 8 a.m. March 24. Costs \$35 for adult, \$30 for child.

: Kids 3 to 5 years old learn about camouflage, predators, prey and the movements of various forms of marine life through songs; dances; and the creation of hermit crab hand puppets, camouflage placements and stacking cups illustrating the food chain in the ocean. This three-session program takes place 3:30 to 4:45 p.m. Feb. 25 and March 4 and 11. Costs \$48 per adult and child.