

Under the Sea

Oklahoma Aquarium brings sea life to the Sooner State

By Traci Chapman
Contributing Writer

The sharks glide silently in the dark water, as the jellyfish cast their iridescent glow all around – but this isn't a California beach or a bay along the Washington coast. It's the Oklahoma Aquarium in Jenks, a place that brings the ocean and its adventures close to home.

The aquarium opened its doors in the culmination of a dream going back almost 20 years. It is a facility boasting more than 100 exhibits full of thousands of animals, said Kara Lovell, special events coordinator.

"The great thing about it is it is so interactive, which is attractive to both adults and children," Lovell said. "There are turtles, stingrays, jellyfish – while you can pet and feed some of them, just looking at and learning about others is fun and exciting."

Oklahoma Aquarium opened in May 2003, based on a passion founders Doug Kemper and Dr. P.R. Ramey started with a drawing on a napkin in 1984. After fundraising and building support across the community, Jenks city officials helped the Oklahoma Aquarium Foundation settle on land on the Arkansas River's west bank, Lovell said.

Crowds have traveled to the 72,000-square-foot aquarium the last 12 years to see eight exhibits, including the shark tunnel and a 30,000-piece antique fishing tackle collection. That wasn't the end, though.

In March, Sea Turtle Island celebrated its grand opening. Called a fully immersive exhibit, the island includes two 300-pound loggerhead sea turtles, tropical fish and reef sharks, all housed in a 56,000-gallon tank. The exhibit will serve as a way to educate visitors on the plight of sea turtles, an endangered species," Lovell said.

Other exhibits include amazing invertebrates, extreme fishes, Ozark Stream, EcoZone and marvels and mysteries, including, of course, shark adventure, one of the biggest draws the aquarium has, Lovell said. The facility is always looking for something new and different for visitors, young and old.

"We have been so fortunate in the donors we have and Jenks' Vision 2025, which has helped us raise funds for the sea turtle exhibit and more," she said.

The aquarium also has a variety of special events, Lovell said. Children can show off their creativity while learning about sea creatures during "Fish Tales," while visitors can see how sharks eat during feeding tours.

"The tour allows you to walk right up to the top of the shark exhibit and see our biologists feed the nurse and bull sharks," Lovell said. "You can't get any closer without getting into the water – which isn't always the best idea."

Other feeding activities including beavers and otters, stripers and electric eel, piranha and archer fish shows, Lovell said.

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