



Education & Human Resources

Hatfield Marine Science Center's SeaFest opens an ocean of discovery

An open house is a chance to invite people in to see your home. It's a party, a chance to show off a little and have a good time with friends.

But when your home is a science center occupying more than 200,000 square feet on 49 acres, with an adjacent 250 acres of estuary habitat that you manage, and your friends are the citizens of Oregon, more than 3,000 of whom show up to see the place, you'd better do some planning.

That's exactly what happened when the Hatfield Marine Science Center decided to host SeaFest, a one-day open house that invited the public for a behind-the-scenes peek at what goes on at Oregon State University's center for ocean sciences at Newport.

Only about 10 percent of the facility—the Visitor Center—is typically open to the public. It's a popular, free stop for visitors to the coast. But the displays only whet the appetite for a closer look at what goes on in the rest of the facility, where 11 federal, state, and other agencies share office and lab space with programs from Oregon State University.

To satisfy that curiosity, the center staff began in 2000 to plan an open house. The event was modeled after an annual event sponsored by the University of Delaware Sea Grant College Program, Coast Day, which since 1976 has drawn tens of thousands of visitors to the Atlantic coast each year. At HMSC, the goals for



SeaFest 2002 included guided tours of the R/V *Wecoma*, the ocean research ship operated by OSU.

the initial event were more modest, but the challenge no less daunting: how to create an event that would attract families, feature science, and let people see what goes on in a major science center and have a good time as well. The theme was, "Discover how we learn from, make a living from, and share information about the sea."

The job of coordinating the event fell to Terri Nogler, program assistant at the HMSC Visitor Center, under the direction of program manager Jon Luke.

In early meetings, planners expressed hope that the event would draw a couple of hundred

attendees but made sure they included provisions for more. And it's a good thing they did, because many, many more people (the local newspaper estimated the number at more than 5,000) showed up to learn not just what humans know about the sea, but how we learned it. Surveys of those who came showed that people really did come for the science; the lab tours and lectures were among the top attractions.

The entire staff of the center was called on to take part, and they did so eagerly. Scientists were among the most avid participants, happy for the chance to explain

the work that goes on in their labs, everything from the study of deep-sea volcanic activity to protecting the health of fisheries and working on oceangoing environmental concerns.

The activities covered the gamut. There were children's activities, including crab races, coloring, and games. There were seafood demonstrations, displays of recreational fishing and boating groups, local geologists, and many more community groups and agencies. The EPA wowed the crowd with a demonstration of its hovercraft, used for traveling across ecologically sensitive areas without causing further damage.

And there was plenty of science. Guided tours of the R/V *Wecoma*, the ocean research ship operated by OSU, drew a line of visitors that snaked across the dock and back up toward the parking area. Lab tours drew hundreds. There were also tours of the surrounding marine estuary and the physical plant that pumps thousands of gallons of seawater through the center each day. A daylong series of lectures by some of HMSC's top ocean scientists kept the Visitor Center's 160-seat auditorium full.

The success of the initial SeaFest was measured not just in the thousands of visitors who spent the day exploring the fascinating world of ocean science. Surveys revealed that they were uniformly

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Another wrote, "The sense of 'community togetherness' that this event brought about was visible." And a third reported, "My 8 year old son loves science so it was a great opportunity to show him a college science lab. We didn't arrive there until about 1, so next time I will do better planning so we can take advantage of the estuary walks. We did, however, make it in time to watch the octopus being fed. He has quite the personality."

And the event itself was not the only benefit from all the hard work that made it happen, another visitor noted.

"From my perspective I saw members of the university, the research community and your Newport leaders, neighbors, and

citizens actually seeing the center and its potential and value for the first time—some with new eyes and a feeling of excitement about the future," the survey respondent wrote. "It was a good venue to showcase not only the entities of HMSC, but numerous Newport and Oregon scientific, commercial, recreational and environmental organizations."

The one complaint from the surveys was actually a compliment about the one-day event. "Please put this on for more than one day—I could not get around to everything!"

Based on that reaction, plans are already well under way for SeaFest 2003, which is scheduled for June 21. The surrounding community, thrilled with the inaugural event, is eager to be more involved this time. Organizers are looking for the right combination of activities to ensure that SeaFest becomes a highlight of summer at the Oregon coast.