



## Education & Human Resources

# Remodeled Visitor Center is strong on hands-on exhibits

**T**HE SALEM BOY CAREFULLY positioned his plastic action figures and sea life toys on the picnic table. “The beak is the only hard part of an octopus,” he said. And it can squeeze through really tiny places . . . anything big enough it can get its beak through, it can get through.”

The youngster was sharing a few of the things he had learned on a school field trip to the OSU Hatfield Marine Science Visitor Center, operated by Oregon Sea Grant, a few weeks before. The squid dissection and facts about deep-sea dwelling fish still resonated with him as he spoke to a group of adults with quiet authority.

The Visitor Center, located adjacent to federal and state marine labs and Yaquina Bay and estuary, is a unique facility in excellent position to create an appreciation for marine science and the marine environment, as well as educate visitors about current marine research.

The science center’s public access wing opened in June of 1965; its popularity grew even as the building and its infrastructure aged. A major, federally-funded remodeling closed the center for nearly two years; it reopened under Sea Grant management in 1997. In the meantime, the Oregon Coast Aquarium opened up a few blocks away, closer to U.S. Highway 101.

The privately-funded aquarium, which housed Keiko the Killer Whale, is a commercial enterprise



OSU's Hatfield Marine Science Center reached more than 10,000 students last year, teaching them through classes, science camps, and tours.

whose admission fees provide significant revenue for marketing, staff, and exhibitry.

The shutdown and new competition took a toll on the Visitor Center’s attendance. From 1994, the last full year before the remodel, and 1998, the first full year after it reopened, general attendance fell off by 100,000 people. And it took until this year to regenerate interest among school groups in spending their field trips at the Visitor Center.

But thanks to increased outreach and marketing efforts, participation this year is back to preclosure levels. During the 1999–2000 school year, 10,841 students

participated in formal educational programs—classes, science camps, and tours.

A strong outreach campaign and advertising to teachers helped school group numbers bounce back, said Vicki Osis, the center’s Sea Grant Extension specialist in marine science education. Substantive programs linked to state required educational objectives and quality instructors haven’t hurt.

“We had the best team of educators I have ever had” this academic year, Osis said.

Ron Crouse, a full-time marine educator, offers the labs and field experiences with help from five temporary employees with science

degrees and teaching experience. K-12 students coming to the center are offered one of 16 different field or lab experiences, all aimed at giving them hands-on, age-appropriate experiences. Student favorites are *Animal Adaptation*, a saltwater lab that focuses on molluscs, echinoderms, and other intertidal creatures; *The Crab Lab*, which gets inside crabs, shrimp, and barnacles; and *Coastal Salmon*, which introduces the life cycles of salmon and steelhead and the problems facing fisheries managers.

Center manager Jon Luke, who came on board in the last year, says the accessibility of researchers and their willingness to collaborate have enriched all of the center's educational efforts. Sea Grant's vision for the Visitor Center, Luke said, is to create a model of informal and formal education for other Sea Grant programs and all public agencies that support scientific research, as well as to advance the art of science education.

Luke and other Sea Grant staff continue to explore strategies to bring more visitors—children and adults—to the center, and to make their visits a richer educational experience. Various formal and informal surveys have sought the opinions of visitors on decisions affecting exhibitry and admission and have attempted to discover how visitors find out about the center and what they're interested in learning about when they arrive.

That work has given preliminary insight into which exhibits are the most intriguing to the public, and where visitors are from—primarily Oregon.

More than 40 percent return at least once; some come back eight times or more. The center traditionally has not charged general admission, although the school tours pay a lab fee. As a result, the center's budget to update its technology-heavy exhibits, market its attractions, or increase its educational activities has been limited. Surveys have also shown that public sentiment remains strong against charging formal admission, so improvements have had to rely on donations, collaborative efforts with federal and state researchers, and staff ingenuity.

The center has encouraged recommendations from locals by, among other things, hosting a hospitality training for Newport's tourist industry and supporting a local high school athletic program.

A recent and expensive experiment, an advertisement in major newspapers, produced nearly 3,000 requests for center information from California, Washington, and across the country. A new, informative Web site was put into place this summer and paper bookmarks are being developed as "stuffers" for purchases from the center's book and gift store, to remind visitors to visit the Web site once they return home. To encourage visitors to

return and spread the word to others, the center has increased its programming, developing summer workshops for families and individuals, evening lectures by researchers on topical themes—and even the occasional "movie night" in the center's auditorium, complete with popcorn.

For example, the center recently took advantage of Oregon Sea Grant's coordination of Oregon State University's Biological Colloquium to offer lectures, exhibits, and educational activities in Newport around the theme of invasive species.

For three years, the center has offered the public daily glimpses into ocean floor mapping and hydrothermal vent research through its collaboration with the New Millennium Observatory (NeMO) research project.

Public presentations are offered twice a day based on data and electronic photographs sent daily from onboard the research vessel. This spring, the center added a four minute orientation video, called *The Patterns of Science*. Not only does the video provide a much-needed introduction to the scientific themes that link the center's exhibitry to OSU research efforts, it also won a coveted "Telly" award for outstanding independent film and video productions.