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Contact: Thom Benson 423-785-3007

The Tennessee Aquarium story – a history

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (May 23, 2011) – *Water. It hugs the shore and gurgles from fountains. It splashes playful children and inspires our creativity. Water floats our boats and soothes our souls.*

The Tennessee River sweeps through the heart of Chattanooga in a boomerang shape – the eternal symbol of a return to the beginning. When Chattanooga envisioned a renaissance for their city 20 years ago, they returned to their river. Now the banks of the river flourish with an aquarium, children’s museum, carousel, theaters, walking paths, pedestrian bridge, pier and other amenities that helped revitalize what had become a dirty, dying downtown.

Chattanooga and visitors by the millions have rediscovered the city’s roots by the river, where a transformation began in 1992 with the opening of the world’s largest freshwater aquarium, the Tennessee Aquarium. Recognized as a “cathedral of conservation” with its glass peaks gracing Chattanooga’s skyline, the Aquarium showcases the city’s greatest natural resource, the Tennessee River.

Like a favorite fishing spot, people return to Chattanooga to visit the Aquarium to see amazing creatures that swim, fly and crawl in natural habitats, but also to enjoy the entire riverfront experience and the natural mountain attractions that surround it. The projects along the riverfront and downtown have made Chattanooga a model for urban revitalization all over the world.

To reclaim the river, citizens returned to the site where the city was born in 1816 – where Cherokee Chief John Ross established a trading post on the banks of the Tennessee River.

Return to the River

The journey back to the river began in 1984, when Chattanooga joined in a community planning process called “Vision 2000.” Restoring downtown’s vitality was very much at the heart of the meetings. At the same time a publicly appointed citizens group – the Moccasin Bend Task Force – hosted community meetings about how to reclaim the Tennessee River. Those discussions were focused on public access and meaningful development along the riverfront.

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It was a group of architectural students from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville who first suggested the idea of an aquarium near the downtown waterfront. These ideas came together in the “Tennessee Riverpark Master Plan.” Published in 1985, this 20-year plan called for \$750 million of mixed-use development, enhancement and conservation along 22 miles of the Tennessee River corridor as it passed through Chattanooga.

During the 1990s Chattanooga started turning plans into bricks and mortar. The Tennessee Aquarium opened in 1992, the Chattanooga Visitors Center in 1993, the Creative Discovery Museum in 1995, the IMAX 3D Theater in 1996. The renovated Walnut Street Bridge opened as a pedestrian-only bridge in 1993. Directly across the river from all of this activity, Coolidge Park, featuring a vintage carousel, opened in 1999, spawning a retail renaissance on the city’s north shore. And on the south end of town, the convention center was expanded a block away from a new conference center and hotel. Private enterprise was rekindled, too, with at least a hundred eateries, shops and other businesses sprouting up to support the influx of downtown visitors.

The sheer volume of activity was enough to capture the nation’s imagination through the media and by word of mouth. The recession-plagued industrial city Walter Cronkite called “the dirtiest city in America” during a 1969 CBS newscast shed its inferiority complex and basked in the limelight of media attention throughout the 1990s, appearing on the covers of “U.S. News and World Report” and “Parade” magazines. Chattanooga was named one of the most enlightened cities in America (“Utne Reader”); one of the top 10 family vacation destinations (“Family Fun” magazine); one of the world’s great cities (NPR’s “Morning Edition”); one of the country’s best places to live, work and play (“Outside” magazine); and was named one of America’s most walkable cities (“Walking” magazine).

Although the transformation began in 1992 with the opening of the Aquarium, it continues today – as recently as the spring of 2005 – when Chattanooga unveiled another \$120 million in riverfront improvements spanning 129 acres. The 21st Century Waterfront Plan capitalized once again on the public/private partnerships that have made Chattanooga a model for urban revitalization. What began as a discussion about improving a marina grew to include expansions of the Tennessee Aquarium and the Hunter Museum of American Art, improvements to the Creative Discovery Museum, public art installations, and the complete overhaul of the riverfront at Chattanooga’s birthplace, Ross’s Landing.

From the mountains to the sea

The Aquarium tells the story of the river – following the path of a raindrop from the streams of an Appalachian Forest to the Gulf of Mexico – from the mountains to the sea. Although the Aquarium has grown in size and in animal population since 1992, its story and its mission have remained the same.

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From free-flying song birds in River Journey's Cove Forest to the Undersea Cavern in the Ocean Journey building, the Aquarium combines both freshwater and saltwater habitats to give visitors an experience unlike any other. Much like the Tennessee River connects us to the Gulf of Mexico, the Aquarium strives to connect visitors to the natural world. The Aquarium's goal is to help people experience the link that exists between humans and the environment and to inspire them to protect it.

The Aquarium experience is an unforgettable adventure underneath magnificent glass peaks where guests explore indoor forests, underwater caverns and deep canyons. Visitors meet amazing creatures like playful river otters, enormous sharks, lurking alligators, whimsical seahorses, pulsing jellyfish, giant catfish and captivating penguins. Surprises abound around every corner, like a giant spider crab pop-up tank or a Shark Island touch station where people can "pet" harmless bamboo sharks and small rays. In the Butterfly Garden, a thousand fluttering jewels of nature surround delighted guests.

The Aquarium's mission

- The Aquarium strives to offer an enriching and enjoyable experience to a wide and diverse audience through: excellent exhibits, a healthy and dynamic living collection, engaging educational programs and activities and outstanding customer service.
- The Aquarium is dedicated to the protection and restoration of wildlife through research and conservation initiatives.
- The Aquarium also provides positive community leadership and economic impact.

Economic impact:

The Tennessee Aquarium is credited with igniting Chattanooga's "renaissance on the river. No single project has played a greater role in revitalizing downtown.

- Since its opening in 1992, the Aquarium has anchored an economic revitalization of the Ross's Landing riverfront district, with an estimated economic impact of \$2 billion, according to the Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce.
- More than 100 stores and restaurants have opened within a few blocks of the Aquarium and ripples of new development continue to spread throughout the district, according to the Chattanooga Downtown Partnership.
- In the 200-acre Ross's Landing area, appraised property values have increased 124 percent.
- Downtown employment rose 38 percent from 1992 to 2002 – 58 percent of that increase took place between 1997 and 2002.
- According to the Chattanooga Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, tourism now brings nearly \$710 million dollars to "the Scenic City."

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A blackboard with no borders

Whether children explore how tree frogs defy gravity with their suction-like toes, or discover that snakes aren't slimy at all, their sponge-like minds soak up the information because they're on a safari, on an adventure, below the surface, beyond the edge and in the zone. When children get up close or hands-on with a creature living in a natural habitat, they become part of its world – learning about its behavior and environment.

Creating an emotional connection between people and nature is the ultimate goal for the Aquarium. The Aquarium helps protect fragile ecosystems by inspiring new generations with wonder and appreciation for the natural world.

In addition to what visitors experience during a tour of the Aquarium – docent talks, narrated dives and gallery programs – thousands of schoolchildren and other organized groups delve deeper into the Aquarium's river of knowledge through hands-on learning in the Environmental Learning Lab, Aquarium summer camps, IMAX films, member events, outreach programs, behind-the-scenes tours, the Museum Magnet School program, home school days and teacher training sessions.

Volunteering is an adventure at the Aquarium

A volunteer who takes the time to show a child hidden creature in an exhibit and tell him a few fun facts can make the difference in the way that child views the natural world. Aquarium volunteers touch thousands of lives daily. Besides that, they have the best fish "tales" of anyone working beneath the Aquarium's peaks.

Aquarium educators train and maintain a large volunteer corps of docents, ambassadors, divers, horticulturists and others, many who work behind the scenes. Docents are stationed throughout the Aquarium galleries to share information about the habitats, animals and plants. They're equipped with fun facts to impress any visitor.

Volunteer divers feed some of the Aquarium animals, monitor animal health and participate in narrated show dives. But they also do the dirty work – cleaning the vast expanses of acrylic windows to give visitors sparkling views every day. Horticulture volunteers are the resident green thumbs who maintain the Aquarium's *other* living collection, the plants in our forests, galleries, exhibits and even in our outdoor gardens and office spaces. We also have event and office volunteers who lend a talented hand with special projects. More than 500 volunteers dedicate hundreds of hours each month.

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The Tennessee Aquarium inspires wonder, appreciation and protection of water and all life that it sustains. Admission is \$24.95 per adult and \$14.95 per child, ages 3-12. Each ticket purchased helps support Aquarium conservation programs. The IMAX® 3D Theater is next door to the Aquarium. Ticket prices are \$8.50 per adult and \$6.00 per child. Aquarium/IMAX combo tickets are \$29.95 for adults and \$19.95 for

children. Excursions aboard the new River Gorge Explorer depart daily into “Tennessee’s Grand Canyon.” Cruise tickets are \$29.00 per adult and \$21.50 per child (3-12). Advance tickets may be purchased online at www.tnaqua.org or by phone at 1-800-262-0695. The Aquarium, located on the banks of the Tennessee River in Chattanooga, is a non-profit organization. Open every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas, the Aquarium and IMAX are accessible to people with disabilities.

ONLINE press kits & downloadable images: <http://www.tnaqua.org/News/Newsroom.aspx>