CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS & TINY WONDERS

HOLIDAYS UNDER THE PEAKS! P. 2
While a shower of snowflakes is never guaranteed during Southeastern winters, you might see a flurry of tiny sea stars or jellies during a special “Stars & Bells” aquarist program. Warm up by donning your brightest holiday sweater as you dare to outshine the Panther Chameleon in its brilliant red and green glory during our “Colorful Chameleons” program.

Aquarium educators will help make the holidays even “hoppy-er” with a new program that will introduce guests to some of our toad and frog species. Did you know that the Cane Toad (no, it’s not named after the candy cane — we checked) is one of the largest toad species in the world? It may not wear a fuzzy red hat, but one bearded creature is sure to wow Aquarium guests before Santa’s big night. Hailing from the deserts of Australia, the Bearded Dragon gets its name from the spiny projections under its neck which it can puff out in order to appear larger to potential predators. It’s also known as one of the fastest reptiles on Earth — reaching running speeds of up to 25 miles an hour!
Speaking of Santa, Aquarium fans know that before it’s time to search the skies, you can find the jolly old elf in the water. SCUBA Claus is back this year, diving Saturdays and Sundays in the River Journey building.

Another family favorite — *The Polar Express 3D* — rolls into the IMAX® 3D Theater starting November 23! This holiday classic follows a young boy as he embarks on a magical train ride to the North Pole. Along the way, he learns about friendship, bravery, and the spirit of Christmas. This film, remastered for the new IMAX® with Laser format, often has audiences grasping at snowflakes, ducking as the train screeches into their laps and feeling the howl of the steam whistle via state-of-the-art digital surround sound. This festive favorite has become a tradition for our members and their families — some even opting to attend a showing in their holiday pajamas!

The “Jolly Old Elf” will begin his weekend appearances in River Journey on Saturday, November 17 through December 23.

“HOLIDAYS UNDER THE PEAKS” IS PROUDLY SPONSORED BY:
Scientists have likened the unparalleled diversity of life in the region’s rivers, lakes and streams to an underwater rainforest, but for many Southeasterners, “underwater” is tantamount to “under the radar.”

With the recent launch of FIN — the Freshwater Information Network — scientists at the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute have realized a years-long quest to open the public’s eyes to the breadth of Southeastern aquatic life. FIN is an interactive, online map that uses a combination of scientific records and verified citizen sightings to show, visually, which of about 400 fish species have been found in more than 75 watersheds spanning eight states. The site’s records cover the Tennessee, Cumberland and Mobile drainage basins, an area that represents just 1.4 percent of the landmass of the United States and Canada but which is home to 46 percent of the continent’s fish species.

The site represents a public portal to information that generally has only been accessible to academics. Having the use of such a powerful set of tools will hopefully inspire more people to appreciate the Southeast’s amazing biodiversity and to want to protect it, says Dr. Bernie Kuhajda, the Aquarium’s manager of science programs.

“If there are cool things living in your backyard, or close by, and you don’t know anything about them, you aren’t going to care about them,” Kuhajda says. “We hope FIN will inspire more wonder and awe, a sense of ownership and a conservation mindset.”

Development of the site was made possible by a 2015 grant through the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ Museums for America program. Whether they’re academics or anglers, input from users will help to build out FIN’s database over time through use of an online form to report the fish they encounter. Once a sighting is confirmed by scientists, a new datapoint will be added to the network, contributing to a living record of Southeastern aquatic life.

Traditionally, scientists have relied on collections of preserved specimens housed at museums and academic institutions to serve as verified records of where species can be found. By making this information purely digital and updateable, FIN provides access to that information more quickly and without adversely affecting living populations.

“From a technological standpoint, space in a museum is a confined building; it’s limited,” says Sarah Sweat, a GIS analyst at the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute who spearheaded the development of FIN. “As technology advances, digital storage has become less expensive and easier to buy, which makes something like FIN easier and more sustainable than jars on a shelf.”

In addition to making it easier for citizens to track and appreciate aquatic life, the network also will help connect biologists working with the same species. Improving communication between academics — especially those working with imperiled animals — could prevent redundant research and make more efficient use of the limited resources set aside for conservation of Southeastern aquatic life, Kuhajda says.

“The long-term game is not only to have better science but, even more importantly, better conservation of our aquatic resources,” he says. “The sooner you know where things are or where populations are declining, the sooner you can pull the fire alarm and raise awareness so people can rally and address a bad situation.”

For more information about FIN — or just to see what fish live in your watershed — visit TNACIFIN.com.
We hope FIN will inspire more wonder and awe, a sense of ownership and a conservation mindset.

— Dr. Bernie Kuhajda
Manager of Science Programs, Tennessee Aquarium
EXPLORE
DISCOVER
CREATE

CONTENT PROVIDED BY THE TENNESSEE AQUARIUM EDUCATION DEPARTMENT — AND YOU! SEND YOUR ANIMAL QUESTIONS AND JOKES TO CDP2@TNAQUA.ORG.

“CANE” YOU CONNECT THE DOTS BELOW?

(When you finish, you should toad-ally color the picture.)

SILLY ANIMAL JOKES

What is Dorothy the Gecko’s favorite classic movie?

The Lizard of Oz

ORANGE PEEL BIRD FEEDER

Don’t leave the birds hangin’ this winter! Make them this special treat.

SUPPLIES:

• Whole oranges
• Twine
• Spoon
• Scissors
• Bird seed
• Pencil or Pen

DIRECTIONS:

1. Cut an orange in half, and scoop all of the fruit out with your spoon.
2. With the pencil, poke 3 holes (evenly spaced) a half inch below the edge of the orange.
3. Cut 3 pieces of twine, each about 10 inches long.
4. Feed one end of twine through a hole starting from the inside to the outside, and tie a knot to secure. Repeat for the 2 remaining strings.
5. Tie all 3 ends of your twine together in a large knot at the top, and fill your orange with bird seed. Find a nice branch outside to hang your feeder!
WINTER EVENTS

DISCOVER NEW MEMBER EVENTS ADDED EACH MONTH ONLINE!
To register: tnaqua.org/events-programs or call 423-267-FISH (3474)

Visit us online for the most up-to-date list of upcoming events including Aquarium After-Hours, Nature Nuts, Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute Tours and much more.

AQUARIUM MEMBER HOLIDAY EVENT

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2 • 6-8:30 PM
ALL AGES • THIS IS A FREE, MEMBERS-ONLY EVENT

We invite you to come dressed in your festive best (or tackiest) as we celebrate holiday traditions new and old. We will deck the halls of our galleries with sights and sounds of the Holiday season. Join in on reindeer games, meet Santa and enjoy a tasty treat! During this special holiday event, members will receive a special 20 percent gift shop discount.

PJ’S & POLAR EXPRESS 3D

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15 & SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16
9:30 AM – 11:45 AM • ALL AGES
$10/MEMBER • $14/NON-MEMBER

Choo! Choo! All aboard the Polar Express for a trip to the North Pole! Begin winter break in a leisurely style. Dress in your favorite pajamas and enjoy a special screening of The Polar Express 3D. This is your chance to meet the Conductor, sip hot cocoa, and enjoy pastries before the movie. Fun for the entire family and all who truly believe!

Nature Nuts

AGES 5-12 • $12/MEMBER

Join Aquarium educators and guest experts for a monthly nature club, especially for children ages 5-12. The Tennessee Aquarium Nature Nuts come together to connect children and their families to the amazing diversity of nature in our own backyards and around the world. Our goal is to kindle a lifelong appreciation for the natural world. Topics will vary month to month.

Enjoy a meal at Big River Grille or BlueWater Grille before or after your Aquarium event. Present your Tennessee Aquarium membership card when you order to receive a discount.
One became a permanent exhibit — Penguins’ Rock. The other space was intended to be a home for changing exhibits. Jellies: Living Art was the first temporary exhibition to open in this space. After a successful run of more than nine years, the gallery closed in September to begin construction of the new exhibit: Island Life.

This exciting new gallery will challenge your ideas about how you define, and think about, islands.

“One many people may envision something like ‘Gilligan’s Island,’” said Thom Demas, the Aquarium’s director of aquatic collections and life support systems. “While that’s one type of island, there are many others. Here in
the Southeast, we’re surrounded by mountain streams that are isolated from each other by physical barriers. They are, in essence, islands of freshwater biodiversity with distinct species. The isolation creates conditions favorable for unique animals, which is why islands of all types are so fascinating.”

As one might imagine, major exhibit changes like Island Life don’t happen overnight. In fact, the process from concept through construction to opening a new attraction often takes more than two years.

Initially, several questions must be answered. What animals will be showcased, and what do they need to be happy, healthy and thrive at the Aquarium? How can we create naturalistic exhibits that best convey their story? How can these habitats be designed to fit the available space and provide the best viewing for guests?

“We want all of our guests to experience Island Life to the fullest,” says Manager of Exhibit Services, Jeff Worley. “We put a lot of emphasis on sight lines. Some of the new exhibits will have floor-to-ceiling viewing, while others will offer a more intimate view into the lives of these animals.”

After Worley produces sketches of the exhibits, scale models are created and reviewed. Eventually, ideas and sketches become blueprints, and the work can begin. For Island Life, the construction timeline extends from the first day of decommissioning Jellies: Living Art on Sept. 17, to the grand opening of Island Life on March 15.

The largest feature in the new gallery will be the Vancouver Island exhibit, a dynamic display of the aquatic life typically found on the rocky shores of the Pacific Northwest.

“I think it’s going to be spectacular,” says Worley. “We are going to release a wave at one end of the tank that will splash against a pop-up feature at the other end. Kids or adults will be able to enjoy watching the wave crashing overhead while looking below the waves to see how the animals live in the surf surrounding an island with a rocky shoreline.”

Similar to how guests experience the habitats and freshwater creatures in the Rivers of the World gallery, they will soon be able to go island hopping to connect with marine and terrestrial animals in the new gallery.

Guests will soon be surrounded by Flashlight Fish, a species from the East Indies whose bioluminescent flashes will light up the room (and their faces).

“Until now, we haven’t been able to tell stories about parts of the tropical Pacific or bring people face-to-face with some of the brilliantly colored fish found there,” says Jackson Andrews, the Aquarium’s vice president and chief operating officer. “I also think people will find the Flashlight Fish exhibit very fascinating. Not many people have laid eyes on them before, and we hope to create an experience that is different from any other aquarium in the world.”

As with any new project, the education department has been very involved in the design process. For the first time, the Aquarium will create kid-sized interpretive panels to complement the graphics designed for grown-ups.

“We’re introducing a new character, Leon the Chameleon, at the Aquarium,” Worley says. “When they see his picture, they’ll find messages about the animals and islands. These graphics are designed for a younger age level along with more interactive displays just for kids.”

While many of the layers for Island Life are already in place, an army of people are now busily constructing the habitats and already caring for the animals that will be the stars of this new attraction.
STOKING THE GIVING SPIRIT

Whether it’s aromatic spices stuffed into the nooks and crannies of a paper-craft turkey or a beguiling brigade of bobbing bubbles, engagement activities are crucial to maintaining the mental and physical well-being of the Aquarium’s animal residents.

If you’d like to contribute supplies with which the Aquarium’s engagement wizards can craft stimulating new experiences for its animals, consider making a purchase from the Tennessee Aquarium Engagement Wishlist on Amazon.

This list is curated by Aquarium staff, who have brainstormed ways to introduce novel experiences into the lives of their charges, whether that’s a puzzle feeder for the Ring-tailed Lemurs or hollow stones into which a Giant Pacific Octopus can squeeze itself. The list is further broken down into sub-categories for those who would like to make the holidays special for a specific animal or group of animals. For more information, search for Tennessee Aquarium under the wish list section on Amazon.com.

AN AQUARIUM FOR EVERYONE

The Aquarium is always seeking ways to ensure it welcomes as broad an audience as possible, but for guests with sensory sensitivities, an otherwise relaxing trip through its galleries can be a stressful, occasionally overwhelming experience.

To ensure guests with these challenges are able to have a positive, impactful visit, the Tennessee Aquarium this September became the first attraction in Tennessee to achieve sensory inclusive certification from KultureCity.

A Birmingham, Alabama-based nonprofit, KultureCity works with visitor-serving organizations to help them recognize and accommodate the needs of individuals with conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), autism and dementia.

“Some of our staff have been trained to assist guests with sensory sensitivities for many years,” says Mara-Lynne Payne, the Aquarium’s manager of diversity and inclusion. “We were looking for an opportunity to provide more training and the necessary tools to offer the most comfortable and accommodating experience for all of our guests.”

More than 80 percent of the Aquarium’s staff attended workshops and completed online training modules to familiarize themselves with the proper protocols and available tools to assist guests with sensory sensitivities.

As an accredited attraction, the Aquarium now has signage designating quiet zones and headphone zones that can serve as an oasis of calm for overwhelmed guests. Additionally, visitors to the Aquarium, IMAX Theater and Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute now can check out “sensory bags” filled with items like fidget tools, verbal cue cards, weighted lap pads and noise-canceling headphones.

WELCOMING HOME SCHOOL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Since opening its doors 26 years ago, the Aquarium has served as a living classroom in which tens of millions of guests have learned about and forged meaningful connections with animals. Additionally, Aquarium educators have long recognized the important role that parents play as first teachers, making trips through the galleries with their children doubly important.

On Jan. 28, the Aquarium will celebrate the first bi-annual Home School Day of 2019 in honor of visitors whose role as first teachers is even more literal. Families visiting on this day will receive discounted admission, can purchase special behind-the-scenes tours for $6, participate in 45-minute science classes, take advantage of gift shop and membership discounts and other awesome perks.

To take advantage, guests simply need to tell admission staff that they are a homeschool family. Students must be accompanied by an adult during their visit. Registration is required for the 45-minute science classes on a first-come-first-served basis. A detailed schedule of events will be available online before the event, and educational materials including an AquaGuide, AquaQuests and Scavenger Hunts, are available on the Aquarium’s Education Resources web page.
HABITAT HEROES

As the Tennessee Aquarium celebrates the second anniversary of the opening for its freshwater science center, the Aquarium is proud to accept a pair of environmental honors that recognize its work as a leader in freshwater conservation.

The Tennessee Valley Chapter of Wild Ones recently recognized the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute and W.M. Whitaker & Associates for the development of the native plant landscaping at the freshwater science center.

The annual “Habitat Hero Awards” recognize individuals and organizations whose exemplary use of native plants demonstrates the mission of Wild Ones: to promote environmentally sound landscaping practices to preserve biodiversity.

Additionally, the United States Green Building Council’s Tennessee Community in September named the Conservation Institute as the recipient of its annual USGBC Tennessee Leadership Award for Tennessee Environments. This award recognizes a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified building dedicated to the conservation of Tennessee’s landscape and climate.

“Our judging panel selected the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute because of the building’s sensitivity to the landscape it occupies, and the mission of the organization to contribute to a more sustainable Tennessee,” writes USGBC’s Cindy Zork in an email announcing the award. “Congratulations to the whole project team!”

The Conservation Institute’s sustainable design uses native plants to restore impaired wetlands and riparian forest strips. Ask any of our scientists, and they’ll tell you everything from pollinators to turkeys and deer enjoy the planted section while boisterous chorus frogs and numerous fish species are thriving in the enhanced wetland.

The bio-retention rain gardens also help improve water quality and provide additional opportunities for the areas outside the building to serve as a living classroom.

Throughout the year, these areas change with seasons. Check our member events for opportunities to tour the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute at: tnaqua.org/events-programs.

WE WANT YOU!

In August, the Tennessee Aquarium was named one of the best aquariums in the world, finishing in the No. 7 spot on TripAdvisor’s list, based on visitor reviews. Earlier this year, the Aquarium was also placed in the travel review site’s Hall of Fame. One of the recurring elements in the glowing praise heaped on the Aquarium by visitors is the engagement they have with the hundreds of volunteers. Along with staff members, the one-on-one interactions volunteer docents have with guests are what make each visit a memorably positive experience. Do you know someone who would make a great docent? Learn more and apply online at: tnaqua.org.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

For several months, the Aquarium has been overhauling the lighting in exhibits throughout the River Journey and Ocean Journey buildings. The lights in most exhibits are being upgraded from incandescent and metal-halide fixtures to those using safer, more energy-efficient LED (light-emitting diode) technology. This lighting technology already appears in a wide range of consumer electronics, including the flash in smart phone cameras, Christmas lights and automotive instrument panels.

The upgrades, which were scheduled to be completed in fall, represent the conclusion of a long-term goal to make the animals easier to see and reduce maintenance costs.

“This is actually an ongoing process that we have been doing over the past few years,” says Director of Facilities and Safety Rodney Fuller. “As the LED technology progresses, we are able to make the changes that will provide the outputs and color spectrums required for our exhibits.”

Some of the smaller tanks in Turtle World and Discovery Hall will continue to be illuminated by the former lighting sources due to the heating and ultraviolet requirements for animals and plants in those habitats. Most exhibits, however, will offer an improved visual experience to new and returning guests.

“The next focus will be the banner and screen lighting inside the IMAX Theater,” Fuller says. “This should complete the campus-wide upgrades to LED.”
When he retired four years ago from Heritage High School in North Georgia, Jack Leather closed the book on a 38-year career instructing students in subjects like environmental science, chemistry and biology. He soon discovered, however, that leaving school didn’t quash his desire to educate.

Last year, he decided to volunteer as a docent at the Aquarium. As he helped guests explore the wonders above and below the waves, he instantly felt drawn to the vibrant, teeming community inside the Ocean Journey building’s live coral exhibit.

“I’m very passionate about talking about our ecosystems and the fact that we’re losing coral at a great rate,” Leather explains. “I want to talk to people about what coral is and encourage them to think about things they can do that will help with the cause down the road.”

“You can say I’m environmentally impassioned,” he adds, laughing.

As anyone who has spent time studying this tank knows, it’s one of the Aquarium’s most densely populated — home to 54 different corals, 30 fish species and 10 types of invertebrates. This makes viewing the exhibit a visual feast, but the sheer number of animals poses an inherent problem when it comes to identifying them.

If staff were to use even small photos to create a comprehensive list of every species in the tank, it would take up an entire wall of the Boneless Beauties gallery. Instead, guests can view photos of a few select species and ask docents stationed at the tank to answer their other questions. The only problem is, the docents were just as in the dark as visitors.

While stationed in the gallery, Leather was able to satisfy his curiosity by quizzing the tank’s caretaker, Senior Aquarist Kyle McPheeters. Even after their conversations, however, he continued to find gaps in his knowledge about the exhibit.

“I kept asking, ‘What are these? What are those?’” Leather recalls. “I thought, ‘Well, Kyle knows all this, but he’s not always out there. How can I get that information out to docents to pass on to the public?’”

So, ever the teacher, he decided to do something about it. With McPheeters’ help — and assists from the Aquarium’s staff photographer Todd Stailey and senior graphic designer Karen Estes — Leather has spent months working on a digital guide to the tank.

Using the exhibit’s most-current species inventory, Leather has compiled a spreadsheet of all the corals in the tank and assigned each a number. Employing a bit of Photoshop magic on an image taken by Stailey, Estes created a visual map of the exhibit with labels identifying each of the dozens of corals so guests and volunteers have a reference to consult.

“Part of our role as docents is to connect with people and help empower them to become stewards of the environment,” Leather says. “That’s what I’m trying to do, to further that.”

McPheeters says he’s been aware for years of the challenges of identifying species within his exhibit. Leather’s self-starter approach to tackling the project was a welcome surprise.

“For years, I’ve known we needed something,” McPheeters says. “To have someone else working on it and trying to push it through has been super-beneficial. This tank has never had enough IDs or a way to show them. I was all ears, for sure.”

Members will soon be able to find this new ID guide on the Tennessee Aquarium app and on the Aquarium’s website.

Above: Senior Aquarist Kyle McPheeters and Aquarium Volunteer Jack Leather meet before open hours to discuss the live coral exhibit. Do you know someone who would make a great docent? Learn more and apply online at: tnaqua.org.
People often think of teaching science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) as just a way to make middle and high schoolers more appealing college prospects and better competitors in future job markets. Given the wonder and curiosity that fuel childhood inquisitiveness, however, the impact of STEM learning can begin much earlier in life.

“By practicing the important skills that are part of STEM, children are actually making connections in their brains about how the world works,” says Aquarium Director of Science Education Dr. Brooke Gorman. “Asking questions, testing ideas — these are important for all people, not just those who go into science, math, or engineering, so it’s great to be able to help children hone these skills early.”

Parents can do their part as first teachers to touch on these concepts, but to really increase STEM literacy, educators need to be equipped to build on learning at home. In the Southeast, however, opportunities to improve instruction of STEM — much less for students to put those skills into action — are few and far between.

Thanks to a pair of recent grants, the Aquarium is now better positioned to help regional educators become more familiar with STEM and comfortable tackling it in the classroom.

A grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Community Catalyst Initiative will be used to improve STEM professional development opportunities for early childhood educators.

“STEM anxiety is a real thing. Teachers don’t have what they need to teach STEM and to help kids with critical thinking,” Gorman says. “This is all about finding out what will help support educators in teaching kids in ways that will help them be successful citizens in the future.”

Thanks to this grant, the Aquarium can shore up a nationwide shortfall among preschool programs. Currently, less than five percent of curriculums at this level are STEM-based, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The lack of high-quality STEM programming in early childhood contributes to educational under-preparedness in Hamilton County, where fewer than half of incoming kindergartners are ready to learn, according to a report from the Chattanooga 2.0 initiative. That deficit can carry through to third grade — where about 60 percent of Hamilton County students aren’t reading on their grade level — prolonging an achievement gap that continues long after graduation.

Another grant, awarded through the Benwood Foundation, will supply elementary schools with robotics kits for students to take part next spring in an underwater remote-operated vehicle (ROV) competition in Chattanooga.

The ROV competition, which will be accredited by Marine Advanced Technical Education (MATE), is tentatively scheduled to take place next March and will be open to teams comprised of later-grade elementary school students. The Benwood grant will fund the purchase of 20 kits, which will be given to educators who attend an Aquarium-led professional development workshop in November. The winner of the Chattanooga competition will proceed next April to the Great Smoky Mountains Regional MATE ROV Competition in Kingsport, Tennessee.

Helping teachers tackle STEM is a major goal of the Aquarium’s education department. Introducing these grant-funded programs is a crucial step to positioning the Aquarium as a valuable educational resource for the entire region, Gorman says.

“This is really helping to expand what the Aquarium is doing to help educators in the area,” she says. “We want to enhance their teaching while also expanding their understanding of STEM concepts.”
The River Society was established this year to recognize our upper-level Annual Fund donors in exciting and unique ways and celebrate the programs and projects made possible by those gifts. As a River Society member, you enjoy greater flexibility with your membership, facilitated by a personal liaison who provides amenities such as tickets for friends visiting from out of town. However, the greatest benefit to membership in The River Society is the opportunity to see the impact of your support in action. River Society members are given special behind-the-scenes experiences during Aquarium After Hours and opportunities to attend exclusive events.

We invite you to become a member of The River Society today by making an unrestricted gift of $1,000 or greater to the Annual Fund. Join others in our community who are part of the excitement unfolding every day at the Aquarium.

**THE RIVER SOCIETY GIVING LEVELS:**
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For more information about joining The River Society, please contact:
Mary Anne Williams, Development Manager
423-785-3037 • mkw@tnaqua.org

Recognizing donors making planned gifts, The Watershed Society was established in 2011 to ensure the Aquarium’s success for future generations. To learn more about including the Aquarium in your estate plans, or other legacy giving options, please contact: **Melanie King, Director of Development** • 423-785-4038 • mjk2@tnaqua.org
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*deceased
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RIVERWATCH EDITOR
Thom Benson

PHOTOGRAPHY
Todd Stailey

DESIGN
Karen Estes & Anji Stiles

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