

NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores Will Make a Big Splash in 2006

North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores

PINE KNOLL SHORES - As its home of nearly 30 years is being remodeled, the N.C. Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores is like a fish out of water.

But no one involved is complaining.

In 2006, the state-operated aquarium will emerge from a \$24 million renovation that will more than triple its space. The largest display tank before expansion held 12,000 gallons, compared to a 306,000-gallon ocean tank under construction. The number of full-time staff will go from 14 to about 40.

"We're in this limbo between what we were and what we're going to be," says Jay Barnes, aquarium director. But, "we will have a world-class facility when we're done."

Before it closed, the aquarium was a must-see vacation attraction, drawing 250,000 visitors a year. The transformed version is

expected to double that number. According to some projections, the new staff positions and increased visitation combined are likely to funnel \$6 million annually into the regional economy.

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The remodeling is aimed at furthering the mission shared by all three North Carolina aquariums - to promote awareness, understanding, appreciation and conservation of the

state's aquatic environments. Since it opened in 1976, the Pine Knoll Shores facility has educated millions - sometimes subtly - on those points. Children on class field trips accounted for many of the learners. Carteret Community College included aquarium visits in its marine biology curriculum. But other visitors weren't necessarily seeking knowledge.

"The public is fascinated by the ocean and its inhabitants," says Barnes. "We try



to capitalize on that fascination and mesh it with the educational components. People come to have a good time and they end up appreciating and understanding the world around them a bit more."

When it reopens, the aquarium will spread over 93,000 square feet, compared to 29,000 square feet prior to remodeling, and will feature several new crowd-pleasing exhibits. The 306,000-gallon ocean tank will contain a replica of the German submarine, *U-352*, that sank off Cape Lookout in 1942. Divers will mingle with sea turtles, sand tiger sharks, moray eels and schools of fishes that commonly congregate around shipwrecks. All this will be visible from an observation window 60 feet long.

A 50,000-gallon tank will duplicate the underwater scene of the shipwreck thought to be Queen Anne's Revenge, again with a typical community of marine life. The flagship of Black-

beard's pirate fleet sank in Beaufort Inlet in 1718. Public excitement was fired when a 1996 diving expedition found timbers and artifacts near the inlet, dating back to the time the pirate vessel went down.

"These shipwrecks are an important part of our history here," Barnes says. "It just so happens they make incredible reefs." Also planned are a jellyfish gallery and a sportfishing exhibit.

The remodeled facility will represent a much bigger picture of aquatic habitats than previously. In addition to familiar saltwater creatures and settings, the 2,500 to 3,000 specimens of mammals, fish, reptiles and amphibians will illustrate aquatic habitats "from the mountains to the sea" in North Carolina.

Visitors will witness a river otter exhibit, a trout pool, a waterfall and other





**The North Carolina Aquarium
at Pine Knoll Shores**

Atlantic Station Shopping Center (Temporary Offices)
Atlantic Beach, NC 28512
252-247-4003
www.ncaquariums.com

Established: 1976
Staff: Approximately 40 full-time positions when reopened
Visitation: Projected 500,000 annually when reopened
Mission: To foster a greater appreciation of North Carolina's aquatic life.
Accreditation: The N.C. Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores and the other two state aquariums are accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association.
Departmental Affiliation: The N.C. Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores is one of three state aquariums operated by the N.C. Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources

Remodeling Highlights:
 Tripled space, to 93,000 square feet
 306,000-gallon ocean tank, observation window 60 feet long
 2,500-3,000 aquatic specimens from the "mountains to the sea"

freshwater habitats from the mountains, the piedmont, the coastal plain, the coast and the ocean.

The popular touch tanks will be back and expanded, allowing visitors memorable personal contact with stingrays as well as crabs, invertebrates and other creatures.

Outdoor Programs

The aquarium will continue to use the habitats surrounding its Pine Knoll Shores building for environmental programs after the remodeling. The aquarium is located in the 295-acre state-owned Roosevelt Natural Area, which

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includes maritime forests, salt marshes, swamp forests, easy access to Bogue Sound and two nature trails winding through the different landscapes.

Canoe treks, field trips, marsh hikes, seining in the sound, clamming and crabbing classes, dredge and trawl trips, beach walks, night treks and other encounters with the coastal outdoors are popular programs.

"Those are all ways our visitors can get closer to the living environment," Barnes says. Although on a reduced schedule, many of these activities will continue from the aquarium's offsite location at Atlantic Station Shopping Center in Atlantic Beach throughout the renovation, thanks to the cooperation of other environmental education organizations.

A day camp for children was held for this summer, and the education staff will be leading school field trips or visiting classrooms with animals in hand as usual. Field trip registrations



Architectural Drawing of Remodeled Aquarium

are handled at the aquarium's temporary quarters at the Atlantic Station Shopping Center.

Though primarily an educational and recreational attraction, the aquarium will add a conservation and research coordinator position in its newly expanded facility to work on staff-initiated and cooperative research projects.

Pine Knoll Shores is the last of the three state aquariums under the N.C. Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources to undergo

\$24 million renovation underway. The society is a non-profit organization supporting all three state aquariums.

Looking Ahead

Thronges of beachgoers account for most of the visitor tally at Pine Knoll Shores, which totals as many as 3,000 on a summer day. In the future, visitation could see 5,000 to 6,000 in a day. But it has its loyal local following who visit year-round as well.

Elizabeth Brant, who grew up on Bogue Sound and lives along its shores today, was six years old when the aquarium opened as the N.C. Marine

Resources Center. The name was changed in 1986.

"I thought it was the greatest place on earth," she says of her first visits with her fellow Brownie Scouts.

"I've never lost my enthusiasm for it." Before it closed, she was a regular visitor with her family and the Girl Scout troop she now leads. A marine biology student at CCC, Brant has seen the other two aquariums since they were expanded, and is anticipating great things for Pine Knoll Shores.

"I can't wait to see it in two years," she says.

Aquarium staff members have more than enough to keep them busy before the doors reopen.

Their temporary quarters are being outfitted to hold specimens collected for the new facility. They are planning new exhibits and programs - and educating themselves on freshwater habitats.

"Our education staff and our husbandry staff will be getting up to speed on habitats and animals we don't know much about," says education curator Bob Patton. And, he says, staff members have hundreds of decisions to make. Although triple the space allows for many more exhibits and programs, no building can contain all the wonders of water and wildlife in North Carolina.

Director Barnes believes the renovated aquarium will be among the best in the nation, bringing its message to millions more.

"People are always looking for fun things to do with their families," he says. While they're having fun, the aquarium offers them a chance to pause and

ponder the richness and variety of North Carolina's aquatic environment.

"That might happen when they see the beauty of a tropical fish or when an octopus changes color," Barnes says. "Or maybe when someone holds a horseshoe crab in their hands for the first time."

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