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### **Aquatic animal curator makes waves in Tacoma's underwater world**

*After nearly three decades, overseer of marine animals at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium retires*

Tacoma, Wash. – Tacoma's "modern-day Jacques Cousteau" starts and ends every day with a ferry trip across Commencement Bay. The time between those ferry rides is currently spent managing a vast underwater world, and after 28 years, he will retire from his role as aquatic animal curator of Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium this June.

Comparing curator John Rupp to Cousteau, PDZA director Gary Geddes said Rupp's contributions to Tacoma's marine community are remarkable.

"He is a world-class biologist and a visionary in aquarium design," Geddes said. "His work on the zoo's tropical South Pacific Aquarium illuminated both his extensive shark expertise and his keen imagination for dramatic and effective exhibitry."

Rupp led the team that brought the South Pacific Aquarium and its unparalleled shark collection to Tacoma when it opened in 1989. For years afterward, the exhibit was a benchmark for aquarium design and Rupp served as a consultant on several subsequent projects around the world.

Speaking of his work on the exhibit, Rupp said, "That contribution to this community is what makes me most proud."

#### **A lifetime on the water**

When asked about his initial interest in marine life, Rupp described himself as a water boy with an intense love of animals.

"I could swim underwater at the same time I could walk," he said. "My parents gave me a pair of goggles when I was 4 years old, and it opened up the world for me."

After learning to surf and SCUBA dive at age 14, Rupp said he was naturally nervous around sharks, but quickly became more curious than scared.

That curiosity led to a decades-long career studying and caring for shark species around the world. Rupp's shark-focused career took him everywhere from the coastline of New Zealand to the shores of Commencement Bay.

"Tracking the sixgill sharks of Puget Sound is one of my favorite responsibilities," Rupp said. "I plan to continue to work in this capacity as a volunteer during retirement."

Not only will Rupp join Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium's volunteer dive program, but he says his future plans won't take him too far from his professional world.

"I don't see myself retiring in the conventional way we sometimes imagine," he said. "I plan to stay very involved in Tacoma's tight-knit underwater world."

Zoo deputy director John Houck has worked with Rupp for more than 25 years and said the ripples Rupp's career will leave on the zoo and aquarium will be felt for decades.

"I have a tremendous respect and admiration for John," Houck said. "He helped bring Point Defiance to a high point in the aquarium world with his scientific expertise, compassionate animal husbandry and inspiring leadership as a manager."

Houck said the zoo will look to Rupp for consultation and guidance for years to come.

"We're not letting him get away that easy," he said. "He will continue to be one of our go-to experts in the world of water."

For more information on Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, visit [www.pdza.org](http://www.pdza.org) or call 253-591-5337.

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*Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only Zoo & Aquarium, is located in Tacoma's beautiful Point Defiance Park, 5400 North Pearl Street. Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium promotes responsible stewardship of the world's resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The Zoo, a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).*