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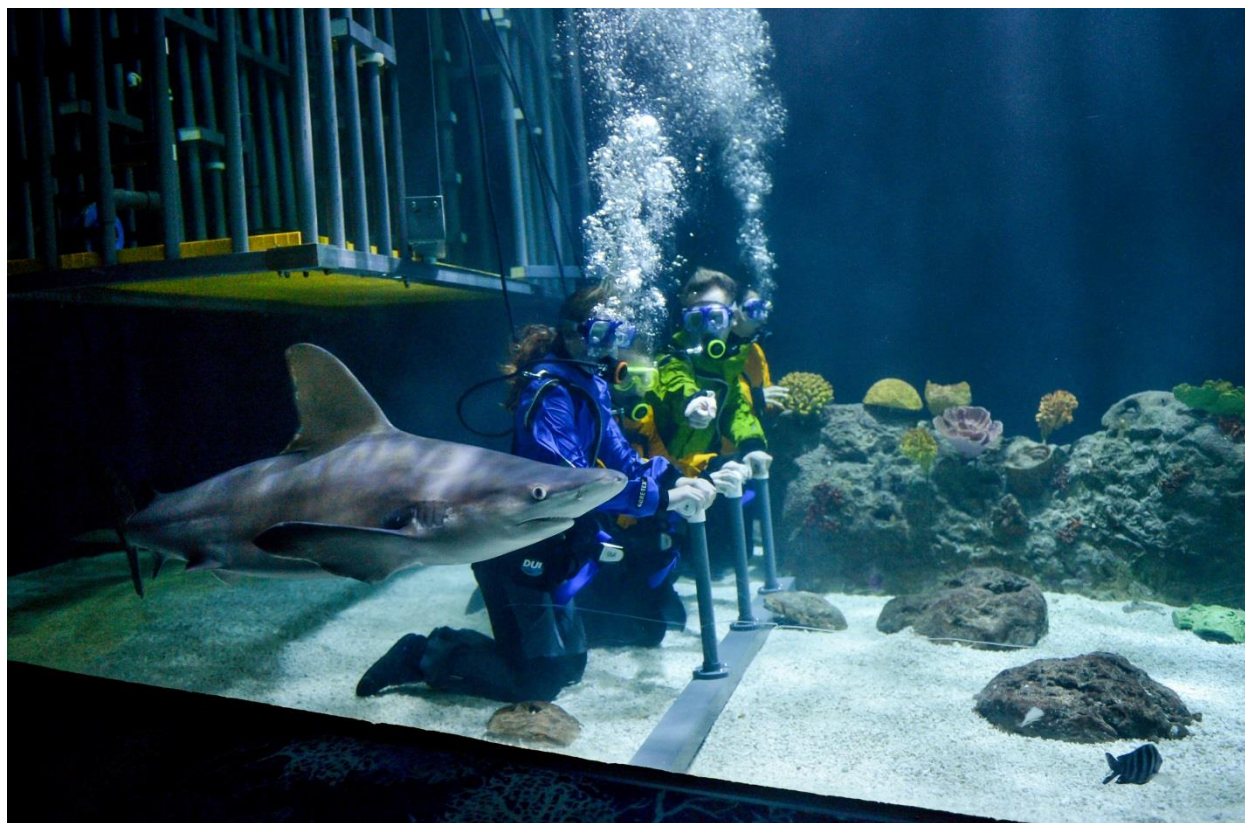
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**NEW BEYOND THE CAGE DIVING PROGRAM ALLOWS VISITORS AS YOUNG AS 10
TO GET CLOSER THAN EVER TO 16 SHARKS AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM**

This is the third experience in the popular Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive program launched two years ago

TACOMA, Wash. – Beginning Thursday, visitors to Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium can get closer than ever to 16 sharks. The all-new Beyond the Cage diving program will allow participants as young as 10 to view five different species of sharks in the open water of the South Pacific Aquarium.

Registration is open at www.pdza.org/dive for the thrilling new experience, an addition to the popular Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive program that began two years ago.



A sandbar shark glides serenely by three participants in a Beyond the Cage test dive for the new program in the South Pacific Aquarium at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium.

As the name implies, Beyond the Cage takes participants outside an underwater enclosure, where they will kneel on the Outer Reef Exhibit's sandy bottom for an awesomely close view of sandbar, sand tiger, black tip reef, nurse

and wobbegong sharks.

No scuba diving certification is necessary, but participants must have successfully completed a dive in the Eye-to-Eye program before they can register for this new experience.

The new program is the only one of its kind in the nation.



A nurse shark swims directly in front of participants in a test dive for the new Beyond the Cage program in the South Pacific Aquarium at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium. A trained diver-guide kneels in the sand to the right of the shark.

Beyond the Cage divers wear dry suits and breathing masks with air-supply hoses and are accompanied by a trained guide on their journey to the bottom of the 225,000-gallon South Pacific Aquarium. Sharks swim, unobstructed, around them.

Prices are \$80 for zoo members, \$95 for nonmembers and include Zoo & Aquarium admission and a souvenir towel.

After learning about shark biology, special features and behaviors to look for during the dive, and practicing some basic scuba skills, participants will spend 30 minutes in the water.

“It is as far as you get into the exhibit, and the best possible view, without being scuba certified,” said Heidi Wilken, one of the aquarium’s dive safety officers.

Beyond the Cage becomes the third experience in the Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive program, which has logged more than 6,000 participants since its launch on Oct. 11, 2013.

The other two components of the program are:

- **Cage Dives:** Participants as young as 8 wear comfortable masks and breathe surface-supplied air through regulators as they stand underwater in a sturdy, 12-foot-by-4-foot cage. No diving experience is necessary. The fee is \$60 for zoo members and \$75 for nonmembers. It includes admission to the zoo and a souvenir towel.

- **Scuba Dives:** Certified scuba divers 15 and older don tanks and swim into the South Pacific Aquarium with trained diver guides for an up-close view of the 16 resident sharks. The cost is \$105 for zoo members; \$120 for nonmembers. It includes admission to the zoo and a souvenir towel.

All three underwater journeys give participants a chance to experience the marine environment while learning more about sharks.

Visitors to the South Pacific Aquarium sometimes believe the acrylic barrier is the only way to stay safe from sharks, Wilken said. The dive programs help challenge that misperception. The Eye-to-Eye cage, for example, is mostly meant to provide stability for visitors who are new to breathing and moving underwater.

“Beyond the Cage is the fun and exciting next step for making a profound connection with our shark ambassadors,” Wilken said.

In the wild, many sharks face the threat of overfishing. Millions succumb to the horrific practice of finning, in which their fins are cut off and their bodies discarded into the sea and left, rudderless, to die. Many sharks also are caught in nets and fishing lines, as accidental bycatch.

Sharks are predators that help maintain a balance in the marine food web, but characterizations of them in popular culture create an unnecessary fear of the animals, Wilken said. Fatalities due to sharks average less than one person per year in the United States.

Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive participants get out of the water with new knowledge and appreciation of the animals, Wilken said. Afterward, they leave with a toolkit of resources they can use to be stronger advocates for sharks.

The Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive program and its educational message is an integral part of Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium’s shark conservation efforts. Program participants are asked to sign a pledge that they will take personal action to help protect sharks. Proceeds from a holiday light recycling program and individual visitors’ contributions have benefited the International Union for the Conservation of Nature’s Shark Specialist Group in determining the status of sharks in the Pacific Northwest.

For more information on shark conservation, go to www.pdza.org/savesharks.

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest’s only combined zoo and aquarium, promotes responsible stewardship of the world’s resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The zoo, a division of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).