



BE WOWED! SMILE AT THE WONDER. EXPERIENCE THE JOY OF AWE.
PACIFIC SEAS AQUARIUM NOW OPEN AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM



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TACOMA, Wash. – Two dozen necks crane up, up, up, eyes riveted on the scene above, as four hammerhead sharks cruise overhead. Sunny the sea turtle joins the scene, swimming unhurriedly by and then diving deeper into his home. Suddenly, two eagle rays “fly” overhead, their pectoral fins gently flapping up and down to propel them through the water.

This is Baja Bay, the 280,000-gallon show-stopper exhibit in the new Pacific Seas Aquarium, which opened to huge crowds and loud oohs and ahhs on Sept. 7 at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium. It is just one of many ocean-animal habitats in which guests can view sea creatures native to areas ranging from the cold waters of Puget Sound and the North Pacific Ocean to the subtropical climes of the waters between Baja California and mainland Mexico.

Admission to the aquarium is free with membership or paid admission to the zoo.



The state-of-the-art, 35,000-square-foot aquarium represents decades of dreaming and four years of design and construction.

It is the largest capital project in Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium's 113-year history.

The new aquarium also is just one of many jewels in the crown of Destination Point Defiance, a Metro Parks Tacoma initiative to improve access, add amenities, and inject more elements of fun and excitement into Point Defiance Park and the surrounding area.

"We have opened the doors to a world of wonder that will wow people of every age," said Andrea Smith, president of the Metro Parks Tacoma Board of Commissioners. "We are enormously grateful to the voters of Tacoma, who said a resounding "Yes" in the 2014 bond-issue election that made construction of the Pacific Seas Aquarium possible. The \$51.6 million project was funded largely with capital improvement bonds, with additional monies supplied by The Zoo Society through donations from individuals, corporations and foundations.

Smith and a young boy dressed in a sea turtle costume cut a ceremonial strand of kelp to officially open the aquarium.

From the moment guests walk through the doors, they are plunged into a wondrous ocean journey. Their first impression through a large eye-level viewing window into the top of Baja Bay likely will be a shark staring back with one emotionless black eye set at the end of that hammer-shaped head. They'll see spotted eagle rays flying by in a silent form of beautiful water ballet, or glimpse 15-year-old sea turtle brothers Sunny and Azul coming to the top of the exhibit, then plunging to its depths.

Orangish Japanese spider crabs, their impossibly long legs holding them to a rocky surface, greet guests next. Then it's on to a five-exhibit Jelly Gallery; its centerpiece is one of only two free-standing jellyfish globes in the United States. Guests will wonder how those jellies got in there, curiously studying the interesting animals as their umbrella-shaped bells propel them through the water. For an even closer connection, visitors may touch the cold water flowing over the globe, their finger marks disappearing in an instant.

And at every stop along stroller- and wheelchair-friendly ramps from one gallery to the next, guests find interactive electronic kiosks that allow them to learn more about the animals they're seeing and even take fun quizzes to test their knowledge of ocean animals.

They follow what appear to be shimmering waters toward a series of habitats large and small, featuring species that live under the Tacoma Narrows bridges; in a coastal kelp forest; in shallow areas and deeper waters. In one, a giant Pacific octopus clings to the rocks or glass, slipping silently into its large habitat, arms waving as it moves along.

The 100,000-gallon Northwest Waters habitat, complete with barnacle-encrusted pilings and more than 400 brightly colored sea anemones, is home to animals that live in the zoo's very own backyard – Puget Sound.

And just down the way, past a large school of metal fish suspended from the ceiling, the Tidal Touch Zone beckons. It is a place where guests connect intimately with the ocean, actually feeling the spikiness of sea urchins, the hardness of small



crabs' shells, the soft squishiness of sea cucumbers and the astonishing variety of surfaces among several species of sea stars.

The Pacific Seas Aquarium is about 20 percent larger than its predecessor, the now-closed, 55-year-old North Pacific Aquarium.

So the tidal-animal touching area is bigger, too.

It allows more room for visitors – notably those with small hands and big imaginations – to get as close as possible to nature.

At Baja Bay, visitors connect, too, but in a different way. Guests looking through the 32-foot-long window may find the expressive dark eyes of Sunny and Azul looking back.

And the window into this subtropical world isn't just your usual view; it arches some 10 feet over visitors' heads, forming an unusual semi-tunnel experience that puts people right in the action. This is where sharks cruise overhead and spotted eagle rays glide by. Colorful subtropical bony fish, such as the bright reddish-orange bigscale soldierfish, flit about in schools.

This amazing building that creates a feeling of being immersed in the ocean was designed by San Francisco-based EHDD, the architectural firm with a long history of bringing world-class aquariums like the one in Monterey, Calif., to life.

But magnificent as it is now, the Pacific Seas Aquarium has more secrets to reveal, more animals to come, more finishing touches to be done.

"It's not 100 percent complete, but it's close," said Alan Varsik, director of Zoological and Environmental Education for Metro Parks Tacoma. "Aquariums are among the most complex buildings to construct and, like any large project, there will be some additional pieces to get just right," he added. "But we're so excited about the extraordinary experiences our guests will have inside, we wanted to invite them in as soon as possible."

For now, aquarium habitat viewing windows are clean, hundreds of animals already are in residence, and beautiful artworks are installed.

But Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium Aquatics Curator Neil Allen, who has spent a lifetime helping people love the ocean and the animals that live there, is eager for the Pacific Seas Aquarium to get that "lived in" feel.

He's certain the sea life inside will spark a new generation of ocean conservationists. And he loves seeing hand and nose prints on all of those sparkling windows.

"The Pacific Seas Aquarium delivers a transformative experience," Allen said. "It's a wonderful feeling to see children's eyes light up when they see and connect with these amazing ocean animals."

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium opens at 9:30 a.m. daily. The zoo has expanded hours through September, opening at 9:30 a.m. and closing at 6 p.m. daily through Sept. 30 (with the exception of a one-day closure at 4 p.m. on Sept. 28).

In addition to the Pacific Seas Aquarium, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium features the South Pacific Aquarium, which remains home to 16 large sharks, the popular [Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive](#) experience, and Stingray Cove, where visitors may touch dinner-plate-sized stingrays and small sharks.

It also is the only combined zoo and aquarium in the Northwest, so in addition to sharks and other sea life, visitors may see endangered Sumatran tigers and clouded leopards, walruses, polar bears, Asian elephants, primates, meerkats and dozens of other animals from around the Pacific Rim.

The zoo also offers camel rides on weekends (weather dependent) and boasts a restored antique carousel featuring colorful zoo animals on which guests may ride.

For more information about the Pacific Seas Aquarium, go to www.pdza.org/pacificseasaquarium.

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only combined zoo and aquarium, practices and promotes responsible stewardship of the world's resources. A member of the [Metro Parks Tacoma](#) family, the zoo creates a legacy of sustainability for future generations through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities; it also embodies Metro Parks' mission of creating healthy opportunities to play, learn and grow. The zoo is accredited by the [Association of Zoos & Aquariums](#) (AZA) and the [Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums](#) (AMMPA). [The Zoo Society](#), a 501(c)(3) organization, is an instrumental partner in the conservation, animal-welfare and education initiatives.

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Photo captions

1. A father and son view scalloped hammerhead sharks swimming overhead in the Baja Bay habitat of the new Pacific Seas Aquarium, which opened Sept. 7 at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium in Tacoma, Wash. The exhibit also is home to two sea turtles, five spotted eagle rays and more than a hundred smaller fish.
2. A young boy gets a lift from his dad as he stares at moon jellies in one of only two free-standing jellyfish globes in the United States. Water continuously flows down the globe and is filtered and recirculated.
3. A 15-year-old green sea turtle and a scalloped hammerhead shark swim by guests on the upper level of the new Pacific Seas Aquarium. They are pictured through an Eye-Level View window, which is one of the first things guests see when they arrive inside the new aquarium at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium. The animals are residents of the 280,000-gallon Baja Bay habitat.

Photo credits: Oona Copperhill/Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium