

Aquarist Interview Transcript

1. What do you like about your job?

I really enjoy food prep and feeding the fish. It is fun to see their personalities come out and be able to connect with individual animals.

Maybe I'm a little strange but cleaning is also very satisfying to me. We do a lot of cleaning.

2. What don't you like about it?

Cleaning coolers. It can be tedious and time-consuming. But it's one of those things that has to get done, so you do it anyway.

I also have to work on Saturday and Sunday. Sometimes it's hard to spend time with friends and family because our schedules are so different. But again, working weekends is just part of the job; that's when the zoo is the busiest!

3. Describe a typical day at work.

I arrive at 6:30 am and begin preparing diets for the Lagoon, Blue Hole, and Stingrays. If it is a shark feed day I also help with those diets. I have to measure and chop many different food items so it's ready to go. Then I help clean certain exhibits. Every day the stingray touch pool must be siphoned. This means the gravel and debris are churned around in a column of moving water to loosen and carry off any debris trapped in the gravel.

Mid-morning is when we do maintenance dives. Sometimes I remain above water as a safety monitor and sometimes I dive. I put on my SCUBA gear and use scrubbers to clean the rocks and walls of the exhibit. Each day a different exhibit gets cleaned.

Then I help with feeds in the South Pacific Aquarium. This sometimes includes talking to the public about what I'm doing. After a feed, I wash the food buckets and dishes. I also write down notes about how the feed went and if I saw any abnormal behaviors. Then I eat lunch.

The afternoon is when we have meetings. We discuss animal welfare, projects, future plans, and anything else necessary. Afterwards, I pull food items out of the freezer, separate them, and put them in the fridge to defrost for tomorrow. I finish any final cleaning tasks then go home at 3:30.

4. Do you work with ALL the aquarium animals, all species? Do you have a favorite animal that you work with?

No, I do not work with all of the aquarium animals; there are thousands! I usually care for just the stingrays, sharks, and bony fish in the South Pacific Aquarium. Other aquarists focus on other areas. The aquarium staff is a little spread out between the old South Pacific Aquarium and the new Pacific Seas Aquarium. Within the PSA, there are teams that focus on Baja Bay, Northwest Waters, Jellyfish, and the other sections. Of course, everyone is ready to help out other teams when needed.

Mato the tomato clownfish is my favorite animal that I work with. Mato started out as a small male, so I named him "Mato" as in a small tomato. Because clownfish are sequential hermaphrodites, now Mato is a large female! She is the dominate tomato clownfish in the exhibit next to the stingray touch pool.

5. What's the hardest part of your job?

Often the hardest part is completing everything on our list! When things happen unexpectedly, such as an animal medical emergency, it can disrupt the entire day and add stress.

It is also really tough when animals pass away. I love all the fish I work with and it is sad to lose them.

6. What type of education and experience do you need in this career field?

You need experience working in an aquarium or taking care of marine animals and a Bachelor's degree in biology, marine biology, or similar field. You'll also need to be SCUBA certified. Aquarists have to dive in the exhibits to clean and do regular maintenance. It also helps to have a good background in chemistry; we test the water quality every day to make sure the pH, salinity, temperature, ozone levels, etc. are balanced and healthy for the fish.

7. What skills are the most important in your job?

You need to be able to communicate and work well in a team, pay attention to details, accept constructive criticism, and work hard. We are all working together for the animals' welfare, so it's important to stay focused on the big picture. Don't let little disagreements or drama affect your job performance. We all work really hard to keep the animals healthy and thriving.

8. What are the advancement/growth opportunities?

Every aquarium or zoo is a little different, but generally you start as a volunteer or intern. When a part-time position becomes available, you apply. If you've worked hard and are a good team player, you could get the job. I started as a volunteer and now I'm part-time. I plan to continue working hard until I can apply to a full-time position. I know I might be part-time for several years, so I have a second job. I would love to be full-time here, but I'm watching for job postings at other aquariums in the country and am willing to move to get a full-time job.

9. What's something that most people don't know about this career?

A lot of people think fish are boring or don't have personalities. They are actually fascinating and do have personalities! The invertebrates like anemones and sea stars are also really interesting. There is a lot we don't know about the ocean, so I'm constantly learning new things.

Aquarists spend a lot of time caring for their animals' habitat. The glass is cleaned every day and the water temperature and chemistry are monitored constantly. The life support system takes care of filtering the water, but we need to know how it works in case something goes wrong.

10. What advice would you give someone who wants to be an aquarist?

Work hard and have a positive attitude! There are many unpleasant tasks, but if you constantly do them well without complaining, your supervisor will notice and could recommend

you for a job opening. Also remember that you are part of a team with a bigger purpose: caring for the animals.