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Contacts:

Kris Sherman, 253-404-3800; 253-226-6718 or [kris.sherman@pdza.org](mailto:kris.sherman@pdza.org)

Whitney DalBalcon, 253-404-3637 or [whitney.dalbalcon@pdza.org](mailto:whitney.dalbalcon@pdza.org)

**8- AND 9-YEAR-OLD SISTERS FROM SPOKANE AREA HELP POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM  
MARK 5,000<sup>TH</sup> PARTICIPANT MILESTONE IN EYE-TO-EYE SHARK DIVE PROGRAM**

*Girls squeal with delight as they emerge from water after coming face-to-face with 16 sharks*

TACOMA, Wash. – In the last 18 months, 5,007 people have taken the plunge, immersing themselves in the world of sharks at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium.

By all accounts, everybody has had a wonderful time during the zoo’s Eye-to-Eye Shark Dives. But perhaps no one enjoyed it more than Spokane-area sisters Cassidy and Kelsey Koch (pronounced Cook) and Toledo, Wash., 8<sup>th</sup>-grader Calab Atkins.

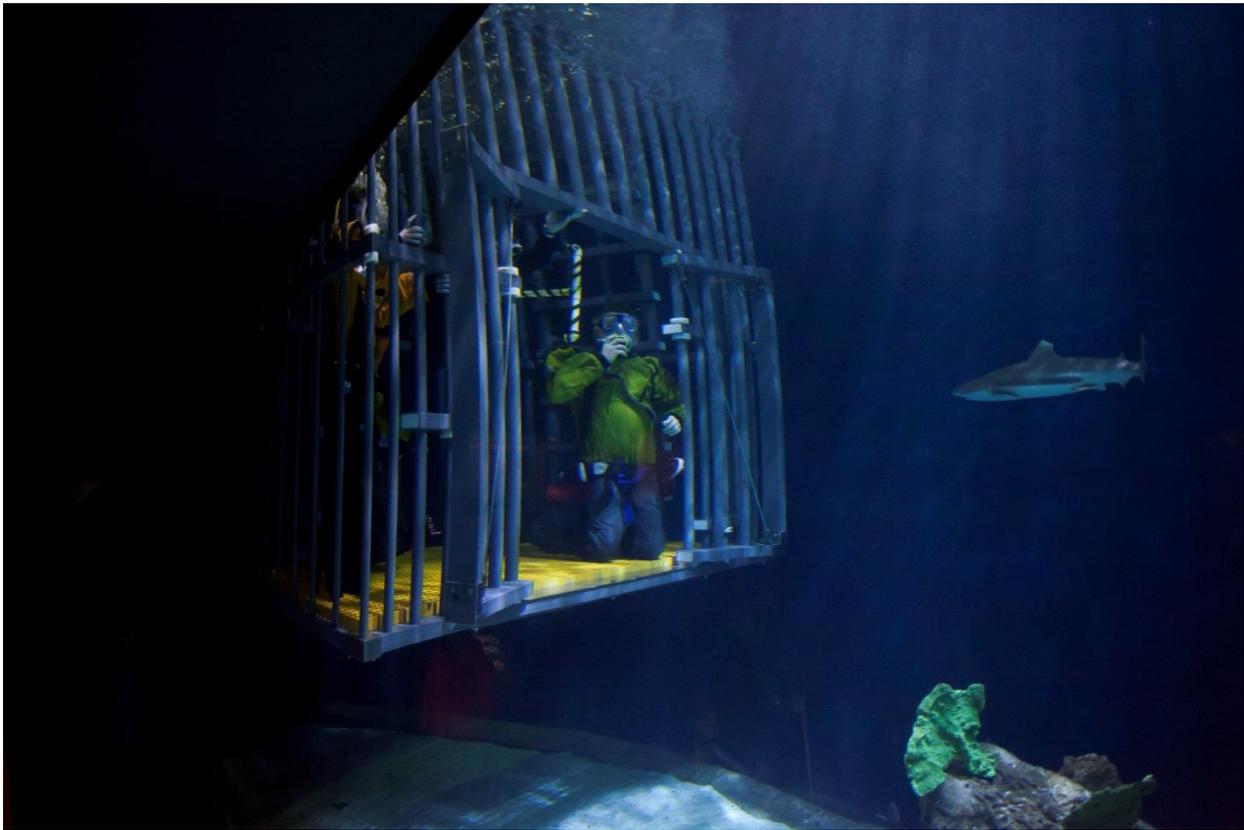


This afternoon, one of the trio was the 5,000<sup>th</sup> diver to enter the water since the program began on Oct. 11, 2013. (But, shhh, we’re not telling which was number 5,000 and which were numbers 5,001 and 5,002, because we wanted to honor all three).

Each received a plush shark, Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive T-shirt and a video of their special dive for helping Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium hit the 5,000<sup>th</sup> diver milestone.

**Kelsey, right, Kristy, center, and Cassidy Koch of Reardan, Wash., were all smiles this afternoon after they dove with 16 sharks at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium and signed a pledge banner to help protect sharks.**

And just as it was advertised 18 months ago, Cassidy, Kelsey and Calab – plus Cassidy and Kelsey’s mom Kristy Koch - found the dive exciting, exhilarating, enlightening and so much more.



Calab Atkins, a 14-year-old Toledo, Wash., 8<sup>th</sup>-grader peers out from the Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive Cage at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium as a shark cruises by in the background. Calab was among a group of divers who marked the 5,000<sup>th</sup> diver milestone in the zoo's 18-month-old program Friday afternoon.



Eye-to-Eye Shark Dives allow participants the unparalleled opportunity to get close to sharks, observe their behavior, marvel at their beauty and gain a greater understanding of these largely misunderstood animals.

"That was amazing! That was awesome! I want to do it again!" an ebullient Calab proclaimed as he emerged from the waters of the 75-degree South Pacific Aquarium. "The sand tiger (shark) was awesome. It's probably the biggest and best shark in there."

Calab, who received the Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive as a birthday gift, plans to be a marine biologist and says he wants to study great white sharks "and protect them."

The Koch sisters were equally effusive.

"I loved going underwater and seeing the sharks," said 9-year-old third-grader Cassidy. "I was a little nervous at first but then I got used to it," she added. "I think they weren't so scary and they were awesome. ... "I'm going to tell people that we should protect the sharks instead of killing them for their fins."

Kelsey, an 8-year-old first-grader agreed.

“I thought it was very cool,” she said. “I was scared at first but later I thought they are beautiful. I’m going to tell my friends that they should come here and take a shark dive.”

No diving experience is necessary. Participants don’t even need a bathing suit. They slip dry suits on over street clothes before entering the warm water of the South Pacific Aquarium shark exhibit. Non-scuba divers breathe surface-supplied air, using mouthpieces and masks supplied in the program. They stand underwater in a sturdy cage and listen to a presentation about the sharks as the animals swim by. Certified scuba divers can don tanks and swim out into the aquarium to get still nearer to the sharks.

Cage dives are open to ages 8 and up; scuba dives are for certified divers aged 15 and up.

What they see are 16 sharks of five different species. Over there, a large, toothy sand tiger shark glides slowly by, just feet away from the cage. A much smaller blacktip reef shark darts around the bars, giving divers a great view as she passes by. Nurse sharks, crevalle jacks and other inhabitants of the South Pacific Aquarium cruise and dart, too.

Those who take the dive say it’s unquestionably fun. It’s eye-opening, too.

“We are totally glad we came,” said Kristy Koch, a 34-year-old teacher at Reardan Middle School near Spokane. She and her daughters came to the zoo especially for the dive as part of a Spring Break visit.



Calab Atkins, right, Kelsey Koch, center, and Cassidy Koch sign a pledge banner promising to help save sharks following their Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive experience this afternoon at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium.

“It was fun to watch them as the sharks got closer,” she said of Cassidy and Kelsey. “It was a great experience for us. We are definitely coming back.”

All four divers in the 5,000<sup>th</sup> diver group signed a special banner pledging to help save sharks.

Eye-to-Eye Shark Dive’s main message is one of conservation and coexistence. The sharks themselves show it’s safe to swim among them. Divers learn how these animals are misunderstood, unfairly maligned by pop culture and mercilessly hunted and killed by the millions for their fins.

Sharks are a critical part of the ecological chain, and their presence is indicative of a healthy ocean.

“The main goal of this program is to publicize the plight of sharks worldwide and to inspire people right here in Puget Sound to help protect and conserve marine life for future generations,” zoo Deputy Director John Houck said. “We want our visitors to leave with a pledge to take action that will help save sharks.”

To date, more than 5,000 divers have signed the pledge to help protect sharks by:

- Refusing to buy shark products such as shark fin soup, sharkskin items, pills made with shark cartilage or shark jaws.
- Choosing sustainable seafood caught in ways that don’t accidentally catch and kill sharks.
- Urging members of Congress to pass laws to protect sharks.

Washington is among 10 states where the sale of shark products is illegal.

Dives are held every Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday at the zoo. Beginning May 1, dives also will be open on Thursdays. Up to four participants can take part in each scheduled dive. Admission for the cage dive is \$60 for zoo members, \$75 for nonmembers and includes a ticket to the zoo and a souvenir towel. Admission for the scuba dive is \$105 for zoo members and \$120 for non-members.

Reservations are required and may be made at [www.pdza.org/dive](http://www.pdza.org/dive).

However, if some dive slots remain open on a given day, they’ll be sold at the front gate on a first-come, first-served basis. So zoo visitors who want to take the plunge on the spur of the moment might ask at the entrance if spots are available.

By the end of the day today, the program had seen its 5,000<sup>th</sup>, 5001<sup>st</sup>, 5002<sup>nd</sup>, 5003<sup>rd</sup>, 5004<sup>th</sup>, 5005<sup>th</sup>, 5006<sup>th</sup> and 5007<sup>th</sup> divers. There plenty of room for more, so come on in, the water is fine.

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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).*