



TROPICAL REEF AQUARIUM TO OPEN JUNE 14 AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 7, 2024

TACOMA, Wash.-- The Tropical Reef Aquarium at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium will reopen June 14, after extensive restoration and repair of critical animal-care structures, habitats, and life support systems. The 15,000 square foot aquarium, previously known as the South Pacific Aquarium, is an oasis of warm-water marine beauty, with vibrant, tropical fish and new shark additions in a refreshed space.

"We are excited to welcome our community back into this awe-inspiring space," said Andrea Smith, president of the Metro Parks Tacoma Board of Commissioners. "We are so grateful to Tacoma voters who passed the bond issue that helped make this major restoration possible."

The \$7.09 million aquarium renovation is funded by the zoo's operating budget and through bonds approved by Tacoma voters in 2014.

"When our guests step inside, they will be transported to a colorful, tropical coral reef environment, complete with a beach, lagoon and outer reef habitats," said Alan Varsik, director of Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma.

In the Outer Reef, which mimics the sandy ocean drop-off of a natural reef, many species of sharks, including blacktip reef sharks, whitetip reef sharks, gray reef sharks, nurse sharks, and zebra sharks, are surrounded by colorful tropical fish, stingrays, and a very charismatic potato grouper named Tater.

Nearby in the Blue Hole and Lagoon habitats, more tropical fish and stingrays dart around, using coral reefs for shelter and protection.

The Tropical Shallows habitat, surrounded by artificial mangrove trees to simulate a silty mud bank, is a hands-on, up-close marine animal experience. Guests are encouraged to touch invertebrates like tropical sea stars, crabs, urchins, snails, and shrimp.

But even after the aquarium opens, there will be more to come. Finishing touches and some "moving in" work will continue through the summer.

A new Coral Reef Up-Close habitat, opening in the fall of 2024, will showcase live coral and highlight the busy coral reef communities of diverse residents, each with important jobs (like human communities). Guests can learn about the challenges facing coral reef communities, such as our changing climate.

Funding for the new live coral habitat is provided by The Zoo Society with generous support from the community, which includes individual and family donors.

Eye-to-Eye Shark Dives – the popular program that has connected over 22,000 thousand people to sharks and their conservation – will reopen later this summer with improvements, including a new and improved diving space within the Outer Reef habitat that increases the comfort factor for both sharks and humans.

Not visible to guests are critical repairs to the 15,000 square foot aquarium that first opened in 1989, including essential roof repairs, repair of concrete cracks and spalling, repair of walkways and spaces used by aquarists to feed and care for sharks and other animals, a new heat pump, ventilator, industrial dehumidifier, and electrical updates, and improvements to life support systems for all the animals.

“Restoring this well-loved aquarium also provides an opportunity to connect the stories of these aquatic animals and their wild homes with our community for years to come,” said Varsik.

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium is the Northwest's only combined zoo and aquarium. In addition to the Tropical Reef Aquarium, the Tacoma zoo has a [Pacific Seas Aquarium](#) with hammerhead sharks, green sea turtles, eagle rays, and the popular Tidal Touch Zone. The zoo is a leader in marine-focused conservation work, with staff and volunteers participating in various projects to protect marine species. From monitoring local kelp forests and rockfish populations in Puget Sound to participating in research that benefits hammerhead sharks in the coral reefs of Hawaii, staff are working to care for aquatic habitats.

The 29-acre Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium is also home to more than 400 marine and land species, many of which are threatened and endangered, including walruses, polar bears, sea otters, Sumatran tigers, Malayan tapirs and clouded leopards.

For more information, go to <https://www.pdza.org/animals/tropical-reef-aquarium/>.

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Media Contact

Tessa Miller, 253-331-5858 or tessa.miller@pdza.org