

SOUTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM
ANNUAL REPORT

2024



Our Mission

To inspire conservation of the natural world by exhibiting and caring for animals, by excelling in education and research and by providing an exceptional visitor experience





Dear Friends,

On a sunny February morning along a beachfront state park outside Jacksonville, Florida, a juvenile green sea turtle named Jim was released into the exiting tide and the warmer winter waters off the coast.

Jim didn't realize it, of course, but this new start in life made her/him a bit of a celebrity. Jim was the 400th sea turtle patient to be rehabilitated and released by the South Carolina Aquarium.

This milestone occasion early last year could not have been envisioned when the Aquarium opened its doors on May 19, 2000. Sea turtle rehabilitation was not a part of our original blueprint. But within days of opening, the Aquarium received a call from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources — a loggerhead sea turtle had washed ashore, in desperate need of care. Our team immediately sprang into action and the rest is history.

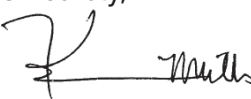
Twenty-five years later, the Aquarium is recognized as a global leader in sea turtle conservation. Our serendipitous entry into this space is an important reminder as we now engage in a new round of strategic planning to define our future. We will need to intentionally plan for long-term sustainability and growth of our critical mission programs. And, we will want to carefully listen to the needs of our partners and the many communities we serve.

The Aquarium looks to the future with both hope and resolve. How can we continue to serve our public effectively with new educational and economic opportunities? Where are our resources best applied to ensure that endangered species are afforded the greatest chance of survival? What more can we do to create capacity within communities to remain resilient in the face of climate change?

What would you like to see the Aquarium become? Over this past quarter of a century, we have become not only what we once imagined, but what we are called upon to be. With your continued support, I am confident we will be ready to answer.

Thank you for your inspiring leadership.

Sincerely,



Kevin Mills
President and CEO
South Carolina Aquarium

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Dear Friends,

While most every year in the life of our South Carolina Aquarium represents countless moments of inspiration, 2024 delivered a truly unprecedented milestone.

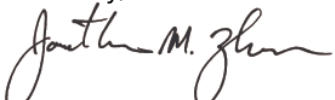
At the close of the year, we completed construction on the Boeing Learning Lab at the Charleston Maritime Center, our new 3,800 square foot education facility. As this new space took shape, the 93,000 square foot central facility of the Aquarium was no longer our sole footprint. We were no longer a building, but a campus.

The mission of this new facility is to double the number of students we serve with our core standards-based STEM education programs. The meaning of the facility is something even more profound. In 2020, we set forth a vision for the Aquarium to expand our impact on the communities we serve, both within our walls and beyond. Over the past four years, our teen programming has evolved and diversified, our community engagement efforts have yielded powerful conservation outcomes and authentic partnerships and our exquisite waterfront is more accessible than ever. All of these points of connection intersect within the future of the life of the Boeing Learning Lab. This facility is now a gateway to our Aquarium Wharf cultural district — a corridor that will welcome and connect students, families and guests to our city, highlighting what is special about Charleston and what is unique about the Aquarium.

Our celebrated Aquarium Aglow holiday lights spectacular has similarly drawn fresh audiences to our waterfront during a regularly quiet season. This innovative experience within our walls is evolving as a family tradition for much of our community. Alongside this creative installation, our team also embarked upon an ambitious renovation of our Coast Gallery. Within this vibrant space, we will open an expanded touch tank experience that will delight each of our 500,000+ annual guests. And finally, as 2024 drew to a close, we secured funding that will enable us to turn our existing classroom spaces into an immersive changing exhibit landscape.

Our momentum is nothing short of extraordinary as we head into our 25th anniversary year, and the role of our donor community cannot be overstated. Each of these cornerstone projects, from fresh facilities to new exhibits and experiences, came to life because of the belief of our supporters. We have much to celebrate, and the future is brighter than ever. For this, I am deeply honored, and I thank you for your commitment to the South Carolina Aquarium.

Sincerely,



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Chairman of the Board
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Learning for All Ages

New Education Outreach eSprinter

Accessing the wonders of water, wildlife and wild places should never be hindered by one’s location. Education Outreach, driven by Mercedes-Benz Vans Charleston, bridged this gap by hitting the road in a brand new, all-electric eSprinter! The donated vehicle was custom-rigged to carry ambassador animals, program supplies and dedicated educators, allowing us to expand our fleet — and our impact — with an environmentally conscious vehicle. Education Outreach brought lessons in deep sea discovery, sea turtle conservation and more to learners of all ages across South Carolina, occasionally even venturing beyond state lines. Since 2008, we’ve connected with 44 of the 46 counties throughout the state; who knows where we may roam next!



Teen Conservation Crew

Connecting classroom coursework with experiential conservation effort was made possible with the inception of Teen Conservation Crew. As the newest addition to our slate of education programming, Teen Conservation Crew introduced 9th and 10th grade students to the power of community-driven conservation. Crew mates engaged in hands-on fieldwork designed to mitigate the effects of climate change within our community, including building artificial reef balls, planting saltmarsh grasses, monitoring coastal flood patterns and more. In its first year, this program made formidable impacts to support biodiverse habitats, start critical conversations and foster a community of curious teens around shared values.



Lifelong Learning Global Discovery

Amplifying the voices of innovative women in STEM lies at the heart of Lifelong Learning Global Discovery. In partnership with WINGS Women of Discovery, this lecture series showcased pioneering female scientists and their groundbreaking research. Included in this pilot season’s lineup was cave diver Jill Heinerth, who was the first person to dive inside of an iceberg; cinematographer Gaelin Rosenwaks, whose childhood experiences compelled her to study sperm whale family dynamics; and marine biologist Callie Veelenturf, whose work with leatherback sea turtles inspired collaboration with scientists, legislators and societal groups. Through powerful narratives of scientific exploration, research breakthroughs and transformational messages, these women inspired audiences to embrace curiosity and chart their own paths.

Marking Incredible Milestones

400th Sea Turtle Release

Releasing even one sea turtle back into the wild is a victory for the species; releasing 10 in one day — including a milestone release for the Aquarium — garnered an even greater impact. Jim, a juvenile green sea turtle named in honor of a beloved staff member who had recently passed, became our 400th released sea turtle patient. Alongside nine other green, Kemp’s ridley and loggerhead sea turtles, Jim swam off into the warm waters of the Atlantic Ocean — a pivotal moment in both our 25-year history of sea turtle rehabilitation and in the future of our impact.

Our Smallest Patient Ever

Celebrating milestones of any size is worthwhile for sea turtle conservation. Chia, a juvenile Kemp’s ridley sea turtle, became the smallest patient in Aquarium history but left an impact that outweighed her/his size. Weighing just 1.46 pounds at admit, Chia was found floating and entangled in plastic debris a few miles offshore. With severe trauma to the right front flipper, head and right eye, Chia underwent a partial flipper amputation to remove necrotic tissues and received treatments focused on healing the head and eye. After months of rehabilitation and adapting to life with one less flipper, Chia was released into the sargassum-rich waters where juvenile sea turtles thrive. Small in size but mighty in spirit, Chia’s journey was a testament to the species’ resilience.



A Wave of Admits and Releases

Saving sea turtles begins with one patient at a time... and we had quite the wave of sick and injured sea turtles come through our doors. A whopping 49 green, Kemp’s ridley and loggerhead sea turtles received lifesaving treatments and care, setting a new record for most local admits in a single year. This milestone reflects not only the tireless dedication of our staff but also the efforts of civilian rescuers, swift collaboration with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and the unwavering support of guests and donors. In response to one record, we set another: 43 rehabilitated sea turtles returned to the wild where they belong, the highest number of releases within a year in Aquarium history. With every record set, we continue to pave the way for the next 25 years of sea turtle rehabilitation.



Connecting With the Community

Angelfish Program Impact

Ensuring the Aquarium remains accessible for all members of our community is essential to inspiring conservation of the natural world. Thanks to the S. Parker Gilbert Angelfish Fund, our Angelfish Program provided \$40 Family memberships and complimentary general admission tickets to South Carolina residents with physical, intellectual or financial limitations. 593 guests visited free of charge within the last year, while an additional 1,325 subsidized Angelfish Family memberships were allocated to community members. By offering more accessible benefits, we foster a sense of belonging for all members, allowing each to fully enjoy all the Aquarium has to offer.



Community Outreach Presence

Strengthening our role as a community leader starts by bringing the Aquarium experience to new audiences. We expanded our outreach efforts to several different community events, instilling our values of conservation education along the way. At the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition, tourists and locals alike engaged with Aquarium staff and volunteers and encountered animal ambassadors. In June, we marched down King Street in a vibrant celebration of love at the Charleston Pride Parade, waving jubilantly at passers by. We embraced a growing audience at the Latin American Festival, highlighting our Spanish-language resources to ensure a more welcoming experience for all. By solidifying our support for community partners and our stance as an inclusive organization, we continue to broaden our reach and connect new individuals with the natural world.

SeaRise Sign Expansion

Refining coastal flood models requires a collective effort. With support from the Southern Environmental Law Center, we installed 25 new SeaRise signs throughout Charleston County to significantly increase awareness of coastal conservation efforts. Placed in flood-prone areas, these signs encourage citizen scientists to collect data on location and depth of floodwaters, providing critical insights for future planning. Residents and visitors can play a part in shaping these flood models by submitting their photos of flooded areas through the SeaRise Project, located in the South Carolina Aquarium Citizen Science app. As these images accumulate over time, our community's efforts will play a vital role in shaping flood prevention strategies and building a more resilient coastline.



Caring for Animals

Great Ocean Tank Fortification

Enabling our guests to have the clearest connection to marine life begins with meticulous exhibit maintenance. As the centerpiece of the Aquarium's aquatic vibrance, the Great Ocean Tank naturally accrued superficial signs of wear and tear over time. For the first time in 25 years, this 42-foot-deep exhibit received a facelift. We equipped a team of divers with motorized tools and flashlights to carefully polish the inside of the acrylic paneling, providing the clearest viewing experience possible while keeping both marine life and diver safety top priority. To complete the transformation, we conducted an extensive media exchange and replaced our sand filters with nine new pallets of sand.

Preventive Care Checkups

Supporting the wellbeing of more than 5,000 animals is a tremendous responsibility, and one we expand upon each year. We performed 234 preventative care exams to monitor the health of our diverse wildlife. On any given day, these checkups may have included a gentle trim of our bald eagle's talons, a careful file of sea urchin teeth or a peek between the gills of colorful reef fish. Utilizing radiographs, blood draws, eye exams and more, we took thoughtful measures to ensure every resident remains in optimal health. Even our smallest creatures — like the hermit crabs, sea stars and sea urchins in the Touch Tank — completed their first full year of preventive care examinations. This full-circle scope of care — paired with nutritional care, enrichment and more — reflected our unwavering commitment for animal wellbeing.



New Animals Around the Aquarium

Highlighting the rich biodiversity of South Carolina means we have the opportunity to introduce new native species to our guests. Many new faces found a home at the Aquarium and added to our statewide tapestry of water, wildlife and wild places. Juvenile American alligators brought a new dynamic to the Coastal Plain, evoking the vitality of a wetland ecosystem. In the Piedmont, four species of tree frogs encouraged guests to play "I Spy" for their camouflaged frames. Three juvenile sand tiger sharks prowled throughout the Great Ocean Tank, quickly becoming guest favorites with their elongated teeth and light brown spots. With every new arrival thoughtfully embodying a different region of South Carolina — from the mountains of the Upstate to the open Atlantic Ocean — these animals help complete the picture of our state's natural wildlife.





Thank You

Since opening our doors in 2000, the success of our efforts to rescue sick and injured sea turtles, engage new learners with the natural world and revive our local landscapes has largely been made possible by the generosity of our donors. As we celebrate our 25th year, we move with purpose and determination to strengthen our impact and look to you to match us in our resolve. It is thanks to you that we have come this far; it is thanks to you that we are prepared to dive even deeper in the next several decades. We're honored to share the ripples of our success with you, and to watch as these ripples become waves. Thank you for your continued support, and for proving what we can achieve together.

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Aimee Neeley
Netter Foundation
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Orangeburg County School District
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Rebecca Parsons
Kathryn and Russell Pickett*
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Price, M.D.
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Jennifer Reid
Ray Reyes
Carolyn Riley
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The Small and Greif Families*
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The Snyder Family
Eugene Stone and Jane Hearn
Angie Thompson
Tides Folly Beach
Linda and John Tompkins
Barbara and Neil Ulrich
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Martin and Mary Jane Vogt
David and Vera Wagner
Carly and Tom Westerman
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Yanni Law
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Jack Naioti
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Anastasia Thaller
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Anna Todd
Carlos Torres
Jessica K. Trayhan
Matthew Treddinnick
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Kristi Turner
Jenna Tuten
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Gina Varat
Diana Vincent
Robin Wagner
Eileen Weinpress
Mike Weinpress
Kimberly Wheat
Noah Wheeler
Ferdanand Wheelings
Carla White
Mikael Wiel
Alene A. Wilkins
S. David Wilkins
Benjamin B. Williamson
Siraya Windsor
Makenzie Wofford
Zachary Wombwell
Michele Wright
Hal Wynne

NAUTILUS SOCIETY

Drs. Kenneth Kwochka and
Theresa Brim
Victoria and Joaquin Delgado
James* and Esther Ferguson
Tom Tate and Lori Fox
Dennis and Lynne Gettelfinger
Karen and John Higgins
Peg and Don Higgins
John and Marilynn Hill
Susan Rohr and Athalie Rohr
Teresa Roundy*
Karen and Richard* Sherwood
Stephen and Carol Welk

Nautilus Society

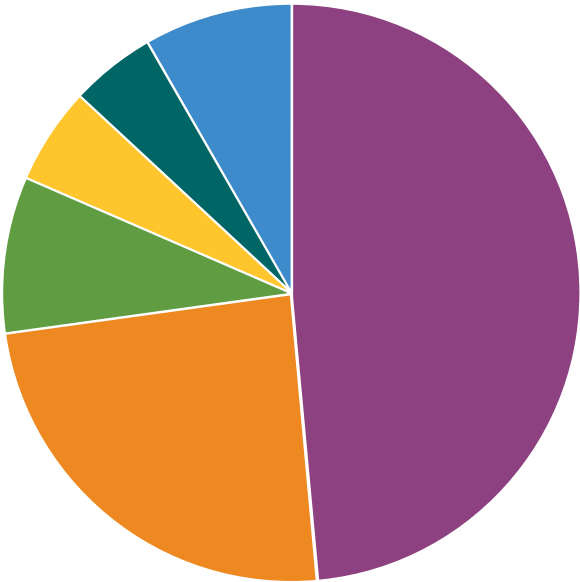
The Nautilus Society honors those committed to building a legacy of impact. By leaving a gift to the South Carolina Aquarium in their estate planning, Nautilus Society members help us inspire conservation of the natural world for generations to come.

Victoria and Joaquin Delgado embody this prolonged passion. Raised with strong connections to water, wildlife and wild places, the Delgados quickly resonated with the Aquarium’s tireless efforts in rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing sea turtles upon their move to Charleston.

“We became fully enamored once we saw how active the Aquarium was in the community. It became a place for us to go and connect with other like-minded people supporting conservation efforts and education,” the Delgados expressed. “We hope we can ensure future generations feel the deep connection to conservation and the local community that we do — all via the team and supportive environment provided at the South Carolina Aquarium.”

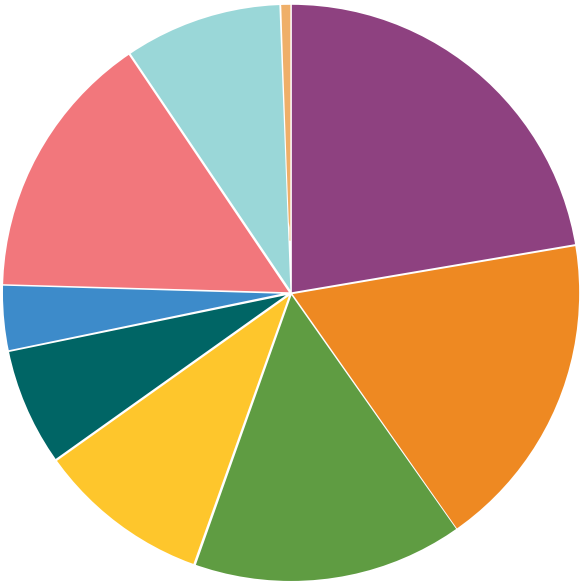


Financials



Supports and Revenue

Admissions	\$9,904,706
Contributions	\$4,944,993
Memberships	\$1,776,309
Other Income	\$1,099,444
Concessions	\$976,419
Programs and Events	
Special Events	\$1,289,245
Supplemental	\$207,745
Fundraising Events	\$100,765
Program Revenues	\$98,074
Total Revenue	\$20,397,700



Expenses

Program Services	
Guest Programs	\$3,864,798
Facilities	\$3,099,284
Animal Care	\$2,623,065
Education	\$1,687,619
Conservation	\$1,145,289
Memberships	\$633,124
Supporting Services	
Management and General	\$2,617,399
Annual Campaign and Fundraising	\$1,529,093
Membership Development	\$103,744
Total Expenses	\$17,303,415

Beyond the Horizon



This year, we're in the midst of a thrilling milestone as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the South Carolina Aquarium. 2025 will be a year in which our extended family of supporters — and the many communities we serve — will be invited to join us in celebration of all that we have achieved in connecting people with water, wildlife and wild places.

As we cut the ribbon on the new Boeing Learning Lab at the Charleston Maritime Center and celebrate the evolution of the Aquarium as a multi-facility waterfront campus, we will seize moments to honor the founders of our institution and the many steadfast investors and believers who have enabled us to thrive. Alongside this year-long celebration, we will also launch a new strategic planning effort that will chart a fresh five-year path for the Aquarium, elevating our mission in innovative ways. We will engage community partners and leaders, as well as members of our board of directors and donor circles, to help us dream of what is possible in the years leading to 2030 and beyond. This refreshed vision will yield exciting surprises around what is possible in the spheres of STEM education, conservation and animal care; our momentum over the last five years has positioned us to embrace these emergent dreams. Completed in 2024, our facility master plan reimagines the scale and landscape of the world within our walls, weaving even more exciting future plans into our new strategic path.

2025 will also be the closing year of our five-year plan, Landmark, where exciting projects within will emerge. As school programming moved to the Boeing Learning Lab, our current classroom spaces will undergo renovations to become a changing exhibit space: the Discovery Gallery. A new expansive and accessible touch tank experience recently opened in the Coast Gallery, and refreshing life support systems and infrastructure to keep our animals healthy is underway. Our expansive teen programs migrated to the new Learning Lab, and we will begin to offer summer camps and after-school programs to diversify our education impact. The Learning Lab will be a vibrant epicenter of community connectivity and student engagement year-round.

The future could not be brighter, and we look forward to enjoying this year of celebration and imagination in the company of our remarkable guests and supporters.



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CHARLESTON, SC 29401

