



TENNESSEE
AQUARIUM

ANNUAL REPORT 2019



WHAT A WAY TO END **THE DECADE**

The last 10 years have been filled with many milestones at the Tennessee Aquarium. We celebrated our 25th anniversary and welcomed our 25-millionth guest. We renovated major exhibits and opened several entirely new ones.

In 2017, an economic impact study identified the Aquarium as one of Chattanooga's main economic drivers. The Aquarium was built on a foundation of community support, and we take great pride in our \$115-million annual impact for Hamilton County.

Generations of students have visited the Aquarium on field trips, and teachers have long seen us as an indispensable partner in the classroom. This decade, however, we took steps to expand our role as an educational resource.



“...we are not only helping protect animals at home and around the world, but also inspiring our guests to do the same.” — Dan Ashe, AZA President & CEO

In 2019, our scientists hit major milestones in long-running conservation efforts. We also cut the ribbon on an expansive new gallery and made extensive improvements to our existing facilities. The decisions and investments we made this year ensure we will continue to amaze future generations of visitors and set ever-higher standards for scientific research and education.

Nowhere is the Aquarium’s history of excellence better exemplified than our longtime membership in the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Accreditation through this international organization is considered the “gold standard” for our industry.

The Tennessee Aquarium is one of only a handful

of organizations to be continually accredited by the AZA for 25 years. In 2019, AZA President and CEO Dan Ashe visited the Aquarium to tour our facilities, address our team and present us with a commemorative plaque in recognition of our extraordinary period of accreditation.

As he spoke, Dan applauded our staff’s dedication to animal care, the Aquarium’s impressive commitment to conservation work, and its significant educational impact. By continuing to excel in these areas, he said, we are not only helping protect animals at home and around the world, but also inspiring our guests to do the same.



In 2017, we created River Teachers, a series of well-received freshwater science workshops for educators. The same year, we joined forces with EPB and the Public Education Foundation, allowing students who can’t visit the Aquarium to learn about aquatic life by watching live video streams of our exhibits.

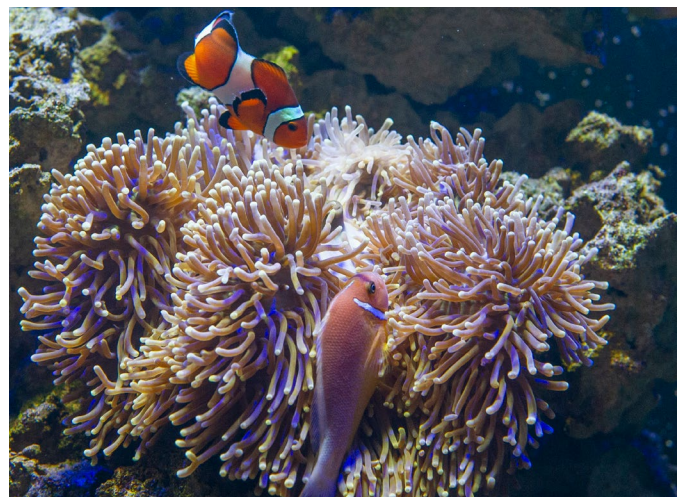
We also further cemented our role as a scientific authority in the Southeast. In 2016, the Aquarium opened the region’s only independent freshwater science center. With this new facility, the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute is even better equipped to study and conserve aquatic life, at home and around the world.





To our members and guests, few events are as exciting as the opening of a new exhibit.

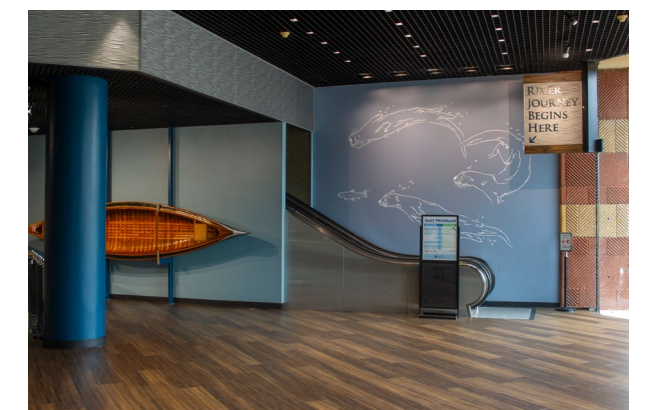
In 2019, we celebrated the addition of Island Life to the Ocean Journey experience. From wildly colorful Panther Chameleons and glimmering Flashlight Fish to a wave-churned recreation of the Vancouver Island coastline, this gallery exhibits a wild variety of life from “islands” of all description. Younger guests, in particular, love the new exhibit’s exploration path, which was specifically designed to delight and inspire them.



The opening of Island Life is an investment in our future. In 2019, we also took steps to update and maintain our existing facilities. As the embarkation point for thousands of visitors every year, the River Journey lobby is responsible for making countless first impressions. In 2019, the lobby received the finishing touches of a facelift that began in 2018.

The entrance’s aging carpets were replaced with new flooring. A beautiful wooden mural now adorns one wall of the lobby with gentle curves that mimic the path of the Tennessee River. This original art was created by the Chattanooga Woodworking Academy and made possible by a grant.

The most important update of all, however, was a much-needed overhaul to our main escalator. This massive piece of machinery is the keystone to our operation in River Journey and has been in near-continuous use since 1992. This fall, a construction crew rebuilt the entire, five-story behemoth in just six weeks. Thanks to the speedy completion time and rerouting of guests by our incredible visitor services team, this important project had minimal impact on visitors’ enjoyment.





In fact, guests were full of praise for the Aquarium in 2019. We regularly conduct surveys of visitors to measure their satisfaction with all aspects of their experience, from entertainment and educational value to cleanliness and employee courtesy. In 2019, our scores in these areas were at an all-time high, with an overall rating of more than 90 percent.

Our reputation is growing outside the buildings, too. This year, a national study by IMPACTS Research evaluated the public's perception of the Aquarium. Its findings show we have come to be seen on equal footing with universities as a trusted source for environmental research.

The findings of this study speak to the sound investments we have made into research and field

work. In 2019, Conservation Institute scientists working at our flagship research facility passed several major conservation milestones.

Since 2012, the Aquarium has collaborated with Trout Unlimited and several governmental partners to raise and re-stock mountain streams with Southern Appalachian Brook Trout. In 2019, we and our partners celebrated the first signs that native fish in one of these streams have become self-sustaining and are spawning on their own.

Last year, our staff also successfully reintroduced the 250,000th juvenile Lake Sturgeon into the Tennessee River. This was a major milestone for our scientists and partners in what is now a 21-year restoration effort. Lake Sturgeon are long-lived and don't reach sexual maturity until they're about 20 years old. In the coming years, then, we're hopeful there will be more cause for celebration as these native river giants begin breeding in the wild.

In a more bittersweet turn for another long-running Aquarium conservation program, the Barrens Topminnow was officially listed as an endangered species in 2019. We have been involved in efforts to save this beautiful native fish since 1999. The move by

U.S. Fish and Wildlife will bring more attention to the Barrens Topminnow and offer greater resources for our conservation efforts, but it also emphasizes how dire the situation has become for many native species and how much they need our help.

Long-running programs like these reveal how crucial commitment is to conservation efforts. Restoring an endangered species is a massive undertaking that requires years — even decades — of dedication. As a non-profit, the Aquarium is well-suited to help willing partners pool their resources, strategize, and work efficiently over the long term.



Whether in-house or in the field, achieving the kinds of success we saw in 2019 was only possible for two reasons: sound financial management and a strong team. Our leadership responsibly invests resources in new, world-class exhibits, while maintaining a high level of quality in our existing facilities. We're proud that we have attracted and retained a talented team dedicated to guest satisfaction, unparalleled animal care, engaging programming, and providing welcoming facilities. This degree of excellence comes with obvious costs. Because of generous supporters like you, we have been able to meet and surpass our own expectations time and time again. Thank you for your continued support.



W. Keith Sanford

W. Keith Sanford
Tennessee Aquarium President and CEO

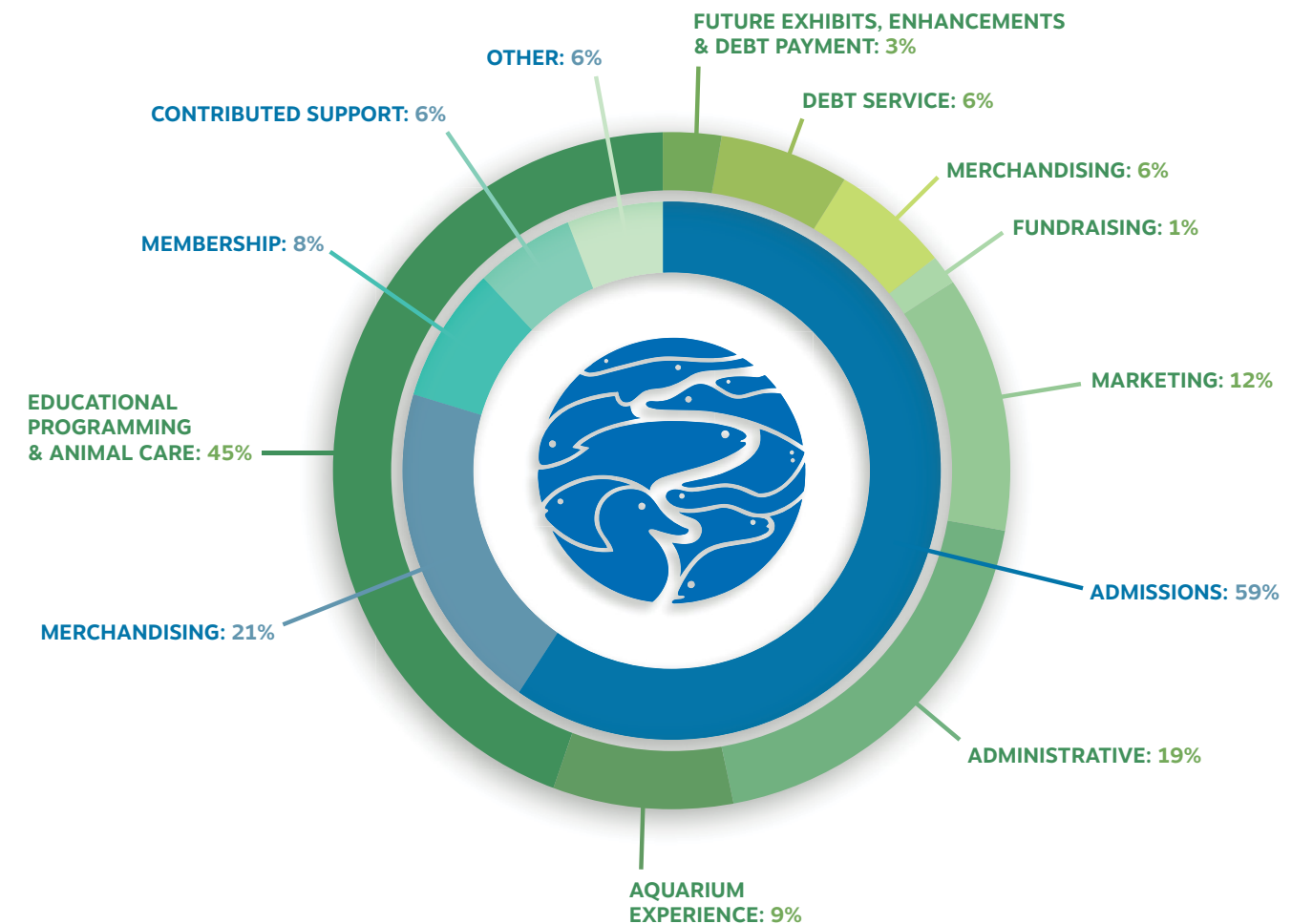
Ward Davenport

Ward Davenport
Tennessee Aquarium Board of Trustees Chair

2019 BY THE NUMBERS

“Throughout 2019, we continued to focus on sound management of our resources. Along with strong attendance and support from our community, our financial position allowed us to accomplish some major improvements to our facilities while continuing to provide our guests the top-notch experience they have come to expect.” – Gordon Stalans, Tennessee Aquarium Vice President-CFO, CIO

SOURCES: \$26,985,594



USES: \$26,206,872



2019 HIGHLIGHTS

DR. JOSH ENNEN'S TURTLE STUDIES

In 2020, the Aquarium is embarking on a year-long celebration of turtles. For the scientists at the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute, however, chelonian conservation and research has been a longtime and ongoing focus.

In 2019, Aquatic Conservation Biologist Dr. Josh Ennen published or submitted a wide range of studies touching on turtle ecology. His published works touched on a variety of subjects, including the impact turtles have on amphibian communities and how renewable energy infrastructure can affect desert tortoises.

This scientific focus comes at a crucial time for turtles, who represent the most endangered group of vertebrates on the planet. More than 60 percent of the

356 species of turtles on Earth are imperiled to some degree. Their general decline is largely human-induced, thanks to habitat degradation and illegal trafficking.

Also in 2019, the academic journal *Biological Conservation* also showcased work by a team of American and Mexican researchers led by Ennen and Sarah Sweat, a geographic information systems analyst at the Conservation Institute. Their international collaboration produced an interactive map defining boundaries for “communities” of related turtle species. The map identifies more than 60 turtle-rich regions around the globe. Armed with this new tool, conservationists will be able to direct their time and money into regions where it can have the greatest impact on the most at-risk turtle species.



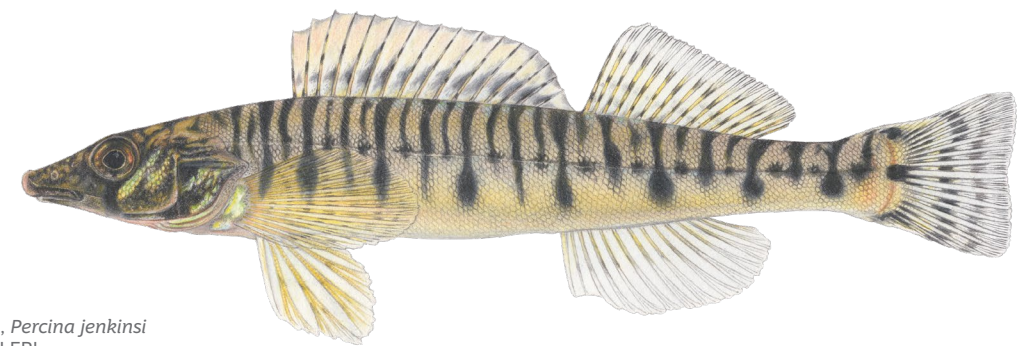
REGIONAL COLLABORATIONS

The life-rich waters of the Southeast are as delicately balanced as a house of cards or a stack of plates. Freshwater scientists understand that the region's unparalleled aquatic biodiversity rests on the coexistence of all its residents, even if they're so small or well-hidden that you don't notice them.

In 2019, the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute fulfilled its role to serve as a nexus for freshwater science and conservation throughout the Southeast. Scientists from the institute collaborated across state lines to study and protect some of the region's most at-risk species. As part of an ongoing U.S. Fish and Wildlife grant to study six species of federally threatened and endangered darters, Science Programs Manager Dr. Bernie Kuhajda traveled extensively across the region and worked with a wide variety of government and non-government agencies, including:

- Georgia Department of Natural Resources
- Kentucky Department of Natural Resources
- Pelican Coast Conservancy
- Geological Survey of Alabama
- University of West Alabama
- Arkansas State University

2019 also brought a two-year partnership with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency-managed Cumberland River Aquatic Center in Gallatin, Tennessee to help raising four endangered species of native bivalves. In the fall, the Aquarium collected about two dozen Common Logperch, whose offspring will be raised at the conservation institute before being shipped to the TWRA facility. There, they serve as the hosts for baby mussels who hopefully will be used to restore mussel beds in the Tennessee and Cumberland River watersheds.



Conasauga Logperch, *Percina jenkinsi*
© JOSEPH R. TOMELLERI



ASIAN CARP PROJECT

Four invasive species of carp collectively known as “Asian Carp” have been filling up and wreaking havoc on the Mississippi River and its major tributaries since the mid-’90s. In addition to competing with native wildlife for the same food sources, Silver Carp in particular pose a significant threat to recreational boaters and can have a profound impact on the sports fishing economy.

In 2019, the Aquarium did its best to raise awareness of the danger posed by the skittish and quickly reproducing Silver Carp. Working with Tennessee Valley Authority and wildlife resources agencies in Kentucky and Tennessee, the Aquarium traveled to Kentucky to document the scale of the carp problem. A trio of videos produced by the Aquarium warned of the impact these fish could cause if allowed to reach Chattanooga and presented ways their advance is being slowed in some infested areas.

One of the means of addressing invasive carp has been to market them as a plentiful source of seafood. With this knives-and-forks defense in mind, Silver Carp was selected as one of two spotlighted species at the annual Serve & Protect seated dinner and live cooking demonstration. During the evening event, guests were served Silver Carp sustainably harvested in the Southeast and transformed into delicious dishes.

For years, Asian Carps’ steady conquest of Southeastern waterways has seen them slowly working through the dam and lock system on the Tennessee and Cumberland River system. Until recently, those obstacles had stalled their advance outside Chattanooga. Unfortunately, at the beginning of 2020, the first of these unwanted invaders was reported in Chickamauga Lake, whose reputation as a haven for bass fishing has been a huge economic driver for Rhea County.



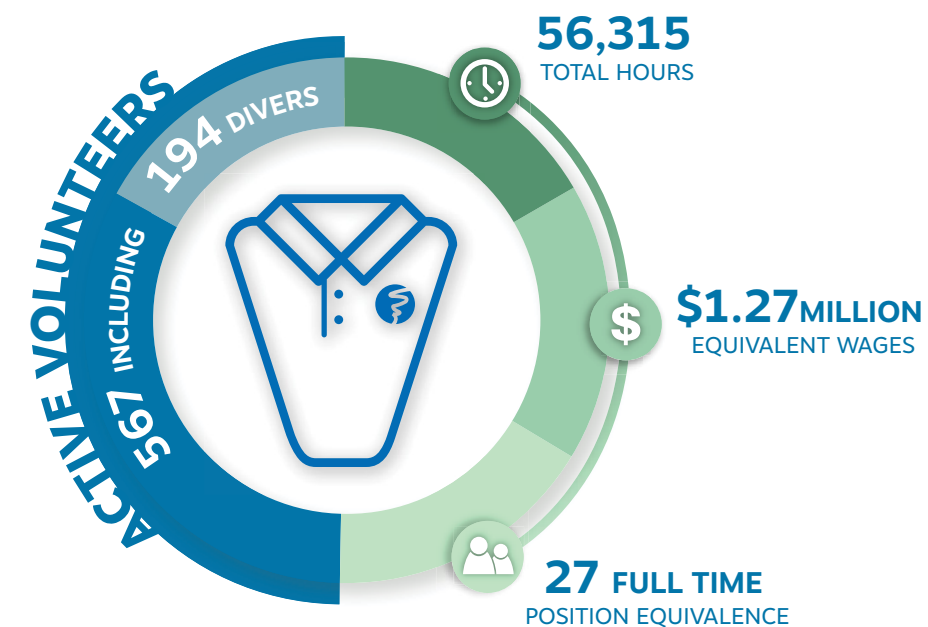
IMLS GRANT FINDINGS

In 2018, the Aquarium was selected for a Community Catalyst Grant by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. In 2019, that award, which totaled more than \$100,000, fueled an in-depth needs assessment of early childhood educators throughout the region.

The lack of high-quality STEM programming in early childhood contributes to educational under-preparedness in Hamilton County, where fewer than half of incoming kindergartners are ready to learn, according to a report from the Chattanooga 2.0 initiative. That deficit can carry through to third grade — where about 60 percent of Hamilton County students aren’t reading on their grade level — prolonging an achievement gap that continues long after graduation.

In all, the grant-funded survey received 340 responses, and five focus group sessions were held. By directly communicating with teachers, the Aquarium and other organizations are better equipped to craft offerings that best serve educators’ needs, hopefully increasing participation and closing the region’s gap in STEM literacy.

2019 VOLUNTEER STATISTICS



PARTNERING WITH SAN DIEGO ZOO KIDS

In a move that surely coaxed smiles from children in particularly challenging circumstances, the Aquarium was pleased to partner with San Diego Zoo Kids. A closed-circuit adventure film series, San Diego Zoo Kids provides short, animal-centric videos nationwide at more than 200 children’s hospitals and Ronald McDonald Houses. It is also shown internationally at facilities in Canada, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Qatar, Pakistan and Curaçao.

Thanks to this partnership with the California-based zoo, children undergoing medical treatment and their families can find much-needed distraction from their fears and concerns by watching fun videos featuring several Aquarium residents, including Southern Appalachian Brook Trout and Paddlefish as well as the River Giants exhibit.

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2019 Serve & Protect

Serve & Protect is an evening highlighting sustainably-caught seafood prepared by nationally-recognized chefs and some of the top restaurateurs in our area. We are grateful for the support of these companies and individuals who made our 9th annual event such a success.

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— IN MEMORIAM — JOHN B. PHILLIPS, JR.



The Tennessee Aquarium lost a devoted friend and champion with the passing of John Phillips on November 14, 2019. John was part of the Aquarium's story from the very beginning, and remained deeply involved as a member of the Board of Trustees from 1992 to 2016, serving as Chairman from 2005 to 2008. Over the years, John marveled at what Chattanooga had been able to achieve as a result of this institution. "Within a week of the Aquarium opening, it was very apparent that it was a hit. It was gangbusters."

He also recognized a greater, lasting impact. "I have to believe that there are students who are going to become something they wouldn't have become if not for the educational opportunities offered here." A proud smile would appear whenever John spoke about the Aquarium's mission to benefit our community. "To see younger people coming along with the same sense of purpose and awe for what we're doing... it helps us all realize how blessed we are."

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