



TENNESSEE  
AQUARIUM

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



FROM MILESTONES TO FUTURE SUCCESS: THE BOARD'S COMMITMENT TO THE AQUARIUM'S LASTING IMPACT

It has been my honor to serve on the Tennessee Aquarium's Board of Trustees for nearly 8 years. My tenure as a board member began just prior to the Aquarium's 25th anniversary in 2017. I was quickly caught up in the excitement of the new Lemur Forest gallery, and the reminders of how much Chattanooga has grown and prospered since the Aquarium opened in 1992.

I've been privileged to be a part of many of the Aquarium's significant milestones. The Aquarium has expanded conservation and education efforts, been recognized as the number one aquarium for overall guest experience, and improved IMAX® to create a truly premium cinematic experience.

I am especially proud of the teamwork that helped the Aquarium move past the pandemic and emerge on solid financial ground. This was largely due to a long history of wise financial planning and stewardship—established by previous board actions and the leadership of the Aquarium's senior team.

As board chair for the past two years, I wanted to ensure the Aquarium's future would continue to be as impactful for the region. I am pleased to report that the Aquarium is poised for future successes as Scott Pierce steps into the role of board chair.

Val's dedication to the Aquarium has been invaluable, especially with respect to naming a new President and CEO. Following Keith's retirement announcement last summer, Val has led the executive search committee to select the next individual who will guide the Aquarium into an exciting future with our

community leaders, state tourism officials, and conservation partners. Setting our new leader up for success is my highest priority as the incoming board chair.

I am also challenging the Board of Trustees to turn our attention back to the strategic planning process. Work had begun on some ambitious goals, and I look forward to restarting this process with our new CEO.

We learned a lot of lessons during the global pandemic, but I'd like to prioritize the development of a new business continuity and disaster recovery plan. Preparation is one of the bedrocks of any business or organization and we'll craft a plan that ensures readiness.

Finally, I'd like the board to prioritize enhancing the work of the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute and recruiting new board members for 2026 using the same successful cohort model that we developed at the end of 2024.

I'm excited for the new opportunities that our next President and CEO will create and for the privilege to carry on Val's fine work as I begin my service as the incoming board chair.

Scott Pierce & Valoria Armstrong



CONSERVATION

WE'RE LEADERS IN FRESHWATER SCIENCE IN THE SOUTHEAST.

Whether we're preventing the extinction of a critically endangered minnow, teaming up with farmers to protect streams, or lending our expertise to long-term efforts to bolster native species, we are the stewards of the Southeast's incredible biological abundance and the voice of freshwater conservation in our region.

Alongside our academic, nonprofit, and governmental partners, we stand ready to ensure future generations inherit this unparalleled natural heritage.







At the beginning of the year, we started field work for a multi-year project to study the federally threatened Trispot Darter. By sampling for this beautiful, elusive fish in the Coosa River drainage of Southeast Tennessee, North Georgia and Northeast Alabama, our biologists hope to learn more about where this species lives and breeds and how best to implement measures to preserve and improve its preferred habitat.

In October, dozens of elementary school students from Brown Academy joined scientists from the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute (TNACI) to release 500 juvenile Lake Sturgeon into the Tennessee River in downtown Chattanooga. This 24-year-old restoration effort, which we co-founded, has seen more than 425,000 of this state-endangered species reintroduced to the Tennessee and Cumberland River watersheds.

Earlier in the spring, our scientists traveled 1,700 miles round trip to Shawano, Wisconsin. There, under the eyes of an excited crowd of local spectators, they assisted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in spawning wild sturgeon in the Wolf River. This experience offered new insights into the earliest stages of Lake Sturgeon propagation and highlighted the importance of community support and engagement in long-term conservation efforts.

The Conservation Institute's work to restore the Southern Appalachian Brook Trout entered new territory this year. In May, TNACI biologists traveled to a pristine mountain stream less than a mile from the North Carolina border to release 80 juvenile Brookies. This was TNACI's first reintroduction into the Nolichucky River watershed, a significant milestone for our 12th year of involvement in the effort to restore Tennessee's only native trout species to its historic range.

In the fall, about 30 endangered Barrens Topminnows raised at the Aquarium were scheduled for release in the Elk River watershed. However, due to a persistent regional drought, flow at the release site had nearly ceased. This led to diminished water quality, the possibility of dangerous temperature fluctuations, and an increased risk of predation for any introduced fish. We indefinitely delayed the release, a decision that could become a more common occurrence as the effects of climate change continue to impact the Southeast.

In 2024, TNACI assisted the Natural Resources Conservation Service in vetting and distributing funding through Ridges to Rivers, a \$10 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) targeting landowners in regions of six Southeast Tennessee counties. This year, 14 contracts were awarded, totaling more than

\$986,000. Through Ridges to Rivers, we helped direct an average of more than \$70,000 toward projects that will benefit properties and improve the health of nearby waterways without financially burdening landowners.

To make farmers aware of the incredible economic resources available through Ridges to Rivers, TNACI representatives attended events ranging from agricultural workshops and kayaking tours to baseball games and festivals. Through this outreach campaign, we engaged with more than 40,000 community members. Our audience included more than 50 landowners who expressed interest in receiving assistance for projects that will benefit their bottom line while also protecting imperiled aquatic species like the critically endangered Laurel Dace.



## A TIMELY RESCUE

In the middle of the summer swelter, Southeast Tennessee wilted under the effects of a prolonged drought which saw water levels in streams in and around Chattanooga drop to dangerously low levels. The impacted waterways included the last two streams atop Walden Ridge north of Chattanooga that are known to host the critically endangered Laurel Dace.

Scientists consider this beautiful minnow to be among the 10 most-imperiled fish species in North America. It was once found in eight streams atop Walden Ridge. In the last decade, however, the Laurel Dace has continuously declined due to

competition with invasive predators, worsening water quality caused by siltation and agricultural runoff, and, most recently, an influx of parasitic trematodes.

As the drought continued, the Laurel Dace's last bastion steadily dried up, adding a host of additional stressors to this already-embattled fish. When freshwater scientists at the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute became aware of the dire conditions on Walden Ridge, it was clear that the Laurel Dace faced the very real threat of going extinct without intervention.

In July, a team of scientists from TNACI launched a rescue operation to save any Laurel Dace that could be recovered from the wild. They were joined by animal care specialists from the Aquarium, representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and a group of students from the University of Georgia. Through that operation and two additional collection events later in the summer, about 300 Laurel Dace — most of those left on Earth — were safely moved into human care at three facilities, with the majority now residing at TNACI's freshwater science headquarters.

The relocated fish thrived in our care, but the hard work of restoring the species is only just beginning. In 2024, TNACI scientists were already evaluating candidate streams as potential sites for Laurel Dace reintroduction. Looking ahead, Conservation Institute biologists will devote their time and energy to studying the parasite afflicting the Laurel Dace's streams and conducting genetic research with an eye to establishing an ark population as a safeguard against the species' extinction in the wild.







The Tennessee Aquarium is one of more than a dozen organizations and attractions partnering in the Chattanooga Public Library's Family Pass program. Provided on a first-come, first-served basis, the pass offers free Aquarium admission for two adults and up to five children, opening the door to fun, educational experiences that might otherwise strain a family's financial resources.

Late in 2024, the Aquarium became one of just 15 Tennessee organizations to join Museums for All, a national access program encouraging people of all backgrounds to visit museums regularly, regardless of financial means. As a participating organization, we now offer reduced admission and discounted IMAX film tickets to families receiving temporary assistance benefits through any state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

fellows from three states gained valuable hands-on experience working alongside biologists, operations specialists, aquarists, husbandry experts, and educators.

We partnered with the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) in 2024 to raise awareness of how household hazardous waste harms waterways. Through social posts and on-site activations, Tennesseans were made aware of permanent disposal facilities and mobile collection events where they can drop off substances like used motor oil, cleaning supplies, pesticides, and paint before they pose a risk to water quality and aquatic life.



# OUTREACH

WE STRIVE TO BRING EVERYONE CLOSER TO NATURE.

When the doors of the Aquarium opened in May 1992, it was the realization of Chattanooga's ambitious dream to forge a better future for itself. For 32 years, we have watched our community thrive and have worked tirelessly to be an invaluable resource to our neighbors for generations.

By eliminating as many barriers as possible to visiting the Aquarium and utilizing our expertise beyond our campus, we aim to ensure that the broadest possible audience feels more connected to the natural world and its inhabitants.

Beginning in February, viewers had the rare opportunity to see the largest animal ever to have lived on one of the few screens large enough to contain it when Blue Whales 3D came to the IMAX® 3D Theater. Thanks to Spanish-language screenings of the film presented each weekend in June, an even wider audience was able to learn more about this living leviathan.

Our fifth class of Jim Hill fellows made important contributions at the Aquarium and the Conservation Institute in 2024. This paid internship aims to open more avenues into conservation science careers for historically underrepresented populations. The program was named for our second president and CEO — the first person of color to lead an American zoo or aquarium. This year, eight

In 2024, we continued our partnership with the Tennessee Department of Transportation's Pollinator Habitat Program to tout the many benefits of native pollinators. Guests visiting in June during Pollinator Week learned more about how animals like bees, butterflies, and even bats benefit plants through daily educational programs, games, and other activities on our plaza.

In June and November, guests from all over the Southeast and even further afield were offered free native flora through a pair of plant giveaways. These outreach events saw more than 950 pollinator-friendly plant plugs bound for gardens as far away as Sacramento, Seattle, Detroit, and Dallas.



# EDUCATION

WE'RE DEVOTED TO IMPROVING NATURAL LITERACY.

In addition to serving as a showcase of beautiful wildlife to hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, we've always recognized that our galleries and programming can help guests gain deeper insights into the world around them. Whether it's serving as a resource to teachers or as a host to an inspirationally memorable slumber party, we value every opportunity to champion the wonders of nature to the public.



The Aquarium's popular summer camps hosted more than 500 kids in 2024. In addition to the usual selection of general interest and specialty offerings for campers ages five and older, this year's schedule included new Tiny Tides camps specifically tailored to preschoolers. To make these fun weeklong programs more accessible, we awarded more than \$9,000 in scholarships to 29 campers in need of financial assistance.

Our education staff put a lot of miles on our fleet of outreach vehicles in 2024. Our off-campus programs reached an audience of more than 11,500 people in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, and Ohio. These efforts included free programs presented to over 1,400 students at 27 Title One schools.

At home, our educators were just as impactful. Through our impromptu cart programs, guided tours, animal encounters, gallery interpretation, and the return of popular Diver Chat presentations, we engaged in meaningful conversations with more than 104,000 guests.

The natural world never sleeps, and neither did our educators. In 2024, we reached more than 2,200 guests after our doors

closed, whether they were snuggling up for one of more than 50 Sleep in the Deep overnight stays or sipping and socializing during Night Life, a popular new evening event for adults.

After a five-year hiatus brought on by the pandemic, our summertime River Teachers workshops returned in 2024, attracting 17 instructors from as far away as West Virginia. The multi-day schedule of activities included field excursions to practice sampling and analytical techniques in local waterways, as well as collaborating to devise ways to incorporate freshwater science into teachers' curricula.

In March, we premiered the Photo Ark, a temporary installation of 24 larger-than-life animal portraits by National Geographic photographer Joel Sartore. The Ark is Sartore's 18-year quest to inspire an appreciation for and desire to protect Earth's biodiversity by photographing every species in human care worldwide. To celebrate the launch, Sartore and his son, Cole, visited the Aquarium, making time to photograph a few additional species before speaking to guests at an evening event.





# ANIMAL CARE

WE PLACE ANIMAL WELL-BEING FIRST.

Our River Journey and Ocean Journey buildings are home to an incredible living collection of more than 13,000 animals representing more than 720 species. From pregnant pipefish to rescued sea turtles, the responsibility for their health and well-being is always foremost on the minds of our dedicated animal care specialists.

Whether we're raising new generations of critically endangered species or achieving unprecedented success in replicating wild habitats, the Aquarium has a well-deserved reputation for upholding the highest standard in animal care.



The construction of a nest by a River Chub triggered a springtime community spawning event in our large stream exhibit in the Ridges to Rivers gallery, echoing species interactions that occur naturally in Southern Appalachian streams. This was the ultimate fulfillment of our goal to create true-to-wild habitats and reports of this event were received with excitement by scientists and experts at other zoos and aquariums. Thanks to funding from an Institute of Museum and Library Sciences grant, it also vindicated months of prototyping and troubleshooting to fine-tune the exhibit.

In March, we celebrated hatching seven critically endangered Arakan Forest Turtles. This set a record for the number of individuals to hatch from a single clutch at an institution accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. The Aquarium is one of only six facilities nationwide caring for this species, whose wild populations have declined by 80% in the last 75 years.

Thanks to a donation from a long-time Aquarium volunteer, we were able to construct an outdoor habitat at our Animal Care Facility in which our beloved Green Sea Turtle rescue, Oscar, can swim and reap the many physiological benefits of basking. For more than four years, Oscar has lived at this off-site facility, where he receives focused care and accommodations to treat complications stemming from a boat strike he experienced early in life.

Our horticulture team is an essential partner in our constant effort to enrich our animals' lives. In addition to continuing to harvest organically grown veggies and fruits in-house, they delivered trays of home-grown turf to serve as textural and nutritious stimulation for animals like Radiated Tortoises, North American River Otters, and Ring-tailed Lemurs.

After the loss of our female Red-collared Brown Lemur, Jessie, in early 2024, her mate, John, was no longer being groomed, a vital social interaction for lemurs. To ensure his needs were being met, our lemur care team began a new training program to act as "substitute lemurs", using brushes to simulate grooming behavior. Their dedicated efforts successfully buoyed John's spirits until he integrated into a social group with our other lemurs.

Just in time for October, we introduced a novel exhibit to our Rivers of the World galley showcasing the unusual ability of "superworms" (Darkling Beetle larvae) to consume and digest various plastic materials. Guests could see this behavior acted out — and learn about the risks posed by plastic waste — as hundreds of superworms in the exhibit steadily ate holes through a model of the Aquarium carved from polystyrene foam.

In June, we were thrilled by the successful hatching of a Macaroni Penguin chick in the Penguins' Rock gallery. This was the first new addition to our colony since 2021 and our first Macaroni chick since 2019. A bidder won the right to name this adorable newcomer, Lyda Sue, in honor of a beloved family member through an auction item in our fall fundraiser.







## WE'RE A MUST-VISIT THEATER FOR CINEPHILES.

With Chattanooga's largest screen and one of the Southeast's only IMAX® with Laser audio-visual suites, the IMAX® 3D Theater has become a destination facility for giant-screen cinema fans.

This reputation has been established thanks to by a steady stream of first-run feature films to complement our selection of compelling, shorter-form documentaries. Whatever the content being shown, our six-story behemoth acts as a window to distant times and exotic settings, offering the kind of cinematic experience few facilities can hope to match.

More than 142,000 people attended IMAX® films in 2024. Their choice of films was more diverse than ever with 35 feature films on the schedule, a 22% increase over the number shown in 2023.

For the fourth time since 2010, the Tennessee Aquarium IMAX® 3D Theater hosted the Giant Screen Cinema Association's annual conference in September. This year's gathering attracted about 200 filmmakers, producers, exhibitors, and other industry professionals from around the world to our theater. For three days, they showcased upcoming projects and celebrated the latest releases by the world's most talented large-format studios.

IMAX® fans in 2024 were abuzz with excitement at the chance to re-experience films at our theater. Our three highest-grossing offerings in 2024 made second (or more) appearances on our screen, including repeat runs of both *Dune* films, a 10th-anniversary

re-screening of *Interstellar*, and our 20th holiday season of showing *The Polar Express* 3D.

We didn't just screen films. Fans responded positively to several unique, IMAX®-only viewing opportunities, including a pre-screening Q&A with the *Twisters* cast, a live stream of the 2024 Olympics opening ceremonies, and a Filmed For IMAX® stage production of *Swan Lake* by the Opéra national de Paris.

To support the launch of our documentary films, we hosted guest speakers and premiere events, including presentations by weather-climate expert Dr. Marshall Shepherd (*The Arctic: Our Frozen Planet* 3D) and marine biologist Dr. Diane Gendron (*Blue Whales: Return of the Giants* 3D). We also threw a dinosaur-themed celebration in partnership with the Creative Discovery Museum (*T. REX* 3D).







# REINVESTMENT

## WE UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Throughout our history, we have continually committed resources toward maintaining and upgrading our infrastructure. These financial investments ensured that the Aquarium experience of our 28 millionth visitor in 2024 was even more safe, comfortable, and awe-inspiring than that of our first guests 32 years ago.

In the summer, our facilities team installed a new boiler in the River Journey building, funded, in part, by a \$75,000 GoodUse grant through the Southface Institute. This installation replaced a vital piece of equipment that has been in use since the Aquarium opened in 1992. The original boiler's longevity is a testament to the skill and dedication of the facilities team. However, the new model's more energy-efficient design will temper operational costs for years to come. To better accommodate larger groups of guests lining up to see our growing number of feature films, we invested in a complete overhaul of the IMAX® 3D Theater's

concessions area. Guests responded well to the new self-serve, a la carte model, and for the first time, the theater's annual concession sales exceeded \$500,000.

In November, we launched an updated ticketing and customer relationship management (CRM) system. These modernized platforms offer guests and members a more streamlined experience with greater control over scheduling their Aquarium visit. The new system also features back-end controls that allow our staff to more easily and efficiently address ticketing issues in response to users' needs and requests.





Category	Percentage
Educational Programming, Facilities and Animal Care	56%
Administrative	23%
Marketing	12%
Guest Experience	6%
Fundraising	3%

**TOTAL USES**  
**\$29,701,817**

Category	Percentage
Admissions	66%
Guest Experiences	14%
Membership	9%
Other	6%
Contributed Support	5%

**TOTAL USES**  
**\$31,293,542**

Charity Navigator  
★ ★ ★ ★  
+ FOUR-STAR +

The Tennessee Aquarium has been recognized as an exemplary nonprofit organization by two leading independent nonprofit evaluators, Candid and Charity Navigator.

Complete audited financial statements are available at [tnaqua.org/about-us/financials-and-annual-report](https://tnaqua.org/about-us/financials-and-annual-report).



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In recognition of Keith Sanford's retirement from the Tennessee Aquarium at the close of 2024, the following supporters made gifts in his honor. At Keith's request, these generous gifts were directed to the Race for the Laurel Dace campaign.

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The Tennessee Aquarium recognizes donors who make a planned gift by welcoming them into the Watershed Society, which ensures the Aquarium's success for future generations.

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# Capital and Endowment Support

Thank you to the following donors who made gifts to the Tennessee Aquarium in 2024.

Charles Arant  
First Horizon Foundation  
Daniel Hurst  
State of Tennessee  
Deborah Williams



Saving a local species on the brink of extinction...we honor the following individuals who made gifts of \$100 or more from October-December 2024. To learn more about the Laurel Dace campaign and our ongoing efforts to save this endangered species, please visit

<https://tnaqua.org/donate/race-for-the-laurel-dace/>

Tina Best	Sandra McCrea
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Thank you to the following donors who contributed to the Aquarium's Annual Fund with gifts of \$1,000 or greater.

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Young Again Foundation

The Aquarium appreciates the following companies who support their employees' contributions through matching gift programs this year.

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Serve It Up is a special culinary fundraising event for the Tennessee Aquarium. Serve It Up 2024 was made possible by:

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The Baldwin Group  
Trudy Harper & Roger Knipp  
Tennessee Valley Authority  
Unum

The Tennessee Aquarium Fall online auction raised over \$28,000 to support our Annual Fund. We thank the following individuals and organizations for supporting the auction through winning bids and/or donating items.

TENNESSEE AQUARIUM ONLINE AUCTION

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Ezekiel Back  
Melinda Baugh  
Nancy Blank  
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- Cody Dyer, Google review

"The aquarium is expertly designed for the ultimate experience. The facility is fully handicap accessible as well."

- Janet Pasquantonio (Never Stop Exploring), Google review

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- Brittney Poling, Google review

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