



Visitors to the Naturalist Aquarium at Beavertail State Park get up close and personal with local marine life. Photo by Andrea von Hohenleiten

Naturalist aquarium offers glimpse of ocean's treasures

By Erin Brown

In a community as small as Jamestown, undiscovered treasures are often hard to come by. But that is exactly what awaits visitors to Beavertail State Park when they step inside the tiny, but fascinating world of the Beavertail Naturalist Aquarium.

"Most people just happen to find this little historic gem," said Brittany Miller, one of the aquarium's naturalists. But a gem it is for those who love ocean creatures — the little aquarium is home to tautog fish, oyster toad fish, dogfish, a snake, a turtle, squid eggs and much more.

According to Miller, the fish and other creatures that now live in the aquarium are obtained mostly through a state program conducted at Fort Wetherill. Others, such as the fresh-water turtle that was recently found on the edge of the ocean, are brought in by local residents. Still others are caught by the naturalists themselves, including the snake that Miller caught, which now lives in one corner of the exhibit.

The naturalists care for the creatures, always mindful that they must be able to survive after they are released back into the ocean or other habitats. Jillian Hesse, another naturalist at the aquarium, remembers the sea raven that was recently released.

"He was one of my favorites, even though he was kind of ugly. But since he can't survive in temperatures above 65 degrees, we had to let him go," she said.

The aquarium has gone through several recent renovations to make the facility more hospitable to the creatures that live there and more appealing to visitors. Tanks have been re-arranged to create a more open environment, and the walls have been painted and decorated with an ocean theme. But the biggest change has been in the lighting — the exhibit is now quite dark.

"It makes the fish feel more relaxed," Miller said. "They're more comfortable, and in the end, more friendly."

Miller said one of the aquarium's most important displays is its recycling exhibit, which includes a child-friendly visual representation of the consequences of not recycling.

The aquarium no longer contains a touch tank, although Hesse said she is hopeful that a touch tank may be added again in the future. Currently, the aquarium contains an open dogfish exhibit that allows visitors to get a close-up look. The dogfish, which are a favorite of the naturalists, look like little sharks, but lack the teeth of a shark. The young dogfish still need some training before they would be ready for touching, Hesse said.

"Most people think you can't train a fish, but you can," she said.

According to Miller, one of the aquarium's biggest draws is its opportunities for hands-on learning. A group of children came in recently, and she took them with her to help catch bait fish, she said. The children were thrilled to

get the fish into their buckets, and were excited about helping in such a hands-on way, Miller added. When the naturalists go out on tidal pool exploration trips, children sometimes help catch crabs.

Children are frequent visitors to the aquarium and the naturalists try to plan exhibits that are both fun and educational. "We are focused on inspiring these young people to help take care of the ocean, and the fish in it," Hesse said.

The aquarium is open seasonally for visitors every day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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