

FINANCE AND COMMERCE

MOA aquarium gets a facelift and a new name

By Scott Carlson

Published : January 17th, 2011

The huge aquarium at the Mall of America is undergoing an around-the-clock makeover that will double its number of sea creatures and give it a new name.

And the bulk of the work on the multimillion-dollar project is occurring during the night to accommodate the sleep habits of the aquarium's 5,000 residents.

Underwater Adventures will officially become the Minnesota SEA LIFE Aquarium on March 11 as the 1.3 million-gallon entertainment/education venue gets nearly a "top to bottom" overhaul, the aquarium's general manager, Craig Atkins, said on Monday. The marine makeover is incorporating scores of new exhibits, including lots of sharks and stingrays, he said.

Another major part of the new SEA LIFE Aquarium will be an underwater Atlantis Temple, complete with a giant replica of a Poseidon figure, as well as an array of displays, hands-on activities and thousands of new sea creatures, Atkins added. The 500,000-gallon tank, currently the Shark Cove, will be filled with sharks, stingrays, sawfish and other fish.

"It (the renovated aquarium) will be a completely new experience for our guests," Atkins said. "It is a complete reimagination of the aquarium."

Another new feature of the aquarium will be two "touch pools" — where visitors will be able to feel a variety of sea creatures including lobsters, horseshoe crabs, horse conches, shrimp and sea urchins. The aquarium will also have new corral cave areas.

British-based Merlin Entertainments Group bought Underwater Adventures from the Minnesota Aquarium in December 2008.

For the aquarium's general contractor, Plymouth-based Construction Results, the renovation work "is definitely one of our most challenging projects," the company's president, Mark Snyder, told Finance & Commerce. "This entire project has been very challenging due to the logistics of bringing equipment and materials in and out of the lowest level of the Mall of America."

Snyder said another challenge has been doing the work with as little disruption to the viewing public during the day while taking into account the demands of the aquarium's owners to do nighttime work that does not disrupt the sleep patterns of its fish and other sea creatures, he said.

Construction Results had a smaller dry run at accommodating the day-night cycles of fish when it did last year's construction on Underwater Adventures' new jellyfish exhibit, Snyder said.

Atkins explained, "We know how the animals respond (to construction). We try to recreate their natural environment, as much as possible." For example, one of the aquarium's inside tunnels is covered with black plastic at night to block the light as construction workers go about their duties, he said.

Another unusual accommodation: Construction Results has had to put down an odorless, blue-colored resin floor. "That's because the fish can detect smells in the air," Snyder said of the flooring that covers about 10,000 square feet.



Underwater Adventures is undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation. Its owner, Merlin Entertainments, is rebranding it as the Minnesota SEA LIFE Aquarium. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Meanwhile, as it is overcoming the construction challenges of the aquarium renovation, Underwater Adventures is also bucking the economic trends of the sluggish economy. Its visitor traffic rose 5 percent in both 2009 and 2010.

Once Underwater Adventures becomes Minnesota SEA LIFE, Atkins expects the rejuvenated aquarium to post a double-digit increase in customer traffic this year.

Atkins said that Underwater Adventures' makeover has been two years in the planning and is a piece of Merlin Entertainments' broader expansion program. Currently, there are about 30 SEA LIFE aquariums around the world, including a handful in the United States, he said.

Besides the Mall of America, Merlin Entertainments has SEA LIFE sites in Arizona, California and plans to open one this July in Dallas.

Underwater Adventures was previously Underwater World and opened in 1996. It filed for bankruptcy in 1998. The Minnesota Aquarium bought the business in 1999 and renamed it Underwater Adventures in 2000.

By the numbers

10,000

Number of sea creatures on exhibit at new Minnesota SEA LIFE aquarium at Mall of America

1 hour, 20 minutes

Average length of time at aquarium for attendee's first visit

Source: Underwater Adventures/Minnesota SEA LIFE Aquarium

Ticket prices

Effective March 11, ticket prices for all-day passes at the Minnesota SEA LIFE Aquarium are expected to be \$19.99 for adults and \$14.99 for children. That represents an increase of \$1.50 for adults and \$1 for children, compared with existing prices, according to an aquarium spokesman.

But the aquarium also expects to have a special promotion this week, where tickets purchased in advance will be \$14.99 for adults and \$11.99 for children.