

**Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.**

**#75 February 26, 2011**

**Discovering the Seymour Center**



*At 87 feet long, it is believed that the blue whale skeleton mounted next to the Seymour Marine Discovery Center is the largest in the world.*

Sitting on the coastal bluff on the west side of Santa Cruz, sometimes call the city's best kept secret, is the Seymour Marine Discovery Center. The Discovery Center doesn't have any desire to be a secret, however, but welcomes visitors of all ages Tuesday through Sunday. This year marked the Center's 10 anniversary, but somewhat surprisingly, there are still occasional local visitors who either didn't know the Marine Discovery Center was there or didn't know it was open to the public. So I want to clear this up. Its here and its here for you.

The mission of the Seymour Center is literally about our ocean backyard. It's not simply an aquarium, although there are many tanks full of interesting and colorful marine life, and it's not a museum. It really is a Marine Discovery Center, where any visitor can discover what ocean scientists or marine biologists do; why studying the ocean and its life is so fascinating and engaging; where around the world the University's marine scientists explore and study; and what they have found out about the sea and its life in their expeditions.

One goal in the displays and exhibits is to change the perception that young people often have that all scientists wear white lab coats and mix chemicals in test tubes. Not so for UC Santa Cruz ocean scientists. Some tag and track seals in the ice and cold of Antarctica, while others study coral reefs and fish in the tropical Pacific.

Marine geologists go out to sea in ships for several months at a time to drill deep cores from the ocean floor in order to unravel the 200 million year history of the ocean basins and past climate change. Others collect and study the plankton, the tiny plants and animals that are at the base of the food chain, the grasslands or pastures of the sea, and which make all other life in the sea possible.

The exhibits are designed to be understood by all visitors, and also to be engaging and educational. Did you know that salmon have otoliths, or very tiny ear bones, that record the history of their life travels through fresh and salt water, one day at a time, like a tape recorder? What's a tape recorder you might ask? Or by placing very small radio-transmitters on elephant seals, we have discovered that they swim thousands of miles out into the north Pacific to feed. We can add time-depth recorders to these small instrument packages. The recorders tell us that these seals spend most of their marathon swims beneath the surface, diving to depths of up to several thousand feet and routinely staying down for 30 to 45 minutes, holding their breath the entire time.

The 10-year anniversary brought a new shark tank to the Marine Discovery Center, and you can actually get up close and touch a three-foot long swell shark. Twenty feet away in one of the small aquariums you can see the embryos of several small swell sharks, in their three inch long egg cases, growing slowly and waiting patiently for nearly a year until they hatch out and enter the real world.

If you head outside you can stand beside a skeleton of the largest animal that ever lived, a massive blue whale. While we tend to think of dinosaurs as the biggest creatures, the blue whale wins the prize, and can grow to over 100 feet long and weigh 200 tons. The whale mounted next to the Marine Discovery Center washed up on the beach at Pescadero in 1978, and through a massive and smelly salvage, cleaning and reconstruction effort, we are fortunate to have her on display for visitors. Another little known fact: not only is this the largest animal that ever lived, to our knowledge, this is the largest preserved and displayed blue whale skeleton anywhere on Earth. And it's all here in your backyard.

There are nearly 200 volunteers and docents who go through an extensive training program, and then donate their time each month to lead tours, work with school groups, keep the aquariums clean, feed the animals, answer questions at the touch tank, and all of the other jobs that are required to keep the Seymour Marine Discovery Center interesting, engaging and a valuable learning experience. If you haven't been, you owe it to yourself and your family and friends to stop by and

visit Santa Cruz' best kept secret. And if you have been, come back and see what new things there are to explore. Spread the word, its not supposed to be a secret.