

# Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

WITH THE KIDS

## Room to stretch their fins

### An expanded Cabrillo Marine Aquarium complex debuts

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

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Sea critters of all sizes will have more fin and flipper room at the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium when the San Pedro facility unveils its \$10-million expanded complex to the public Saturday.

Nestled alongside the original Frank Gehry-designed structure on the beachfront, the new two-story wing houses an exploration center, an aquatic nursery, a research library and a spacious courtyard. (The new structure was designed by Barton Phelps and Associates.)

An official "kelp-cutting" ceremony Saturday will be followed by music, children's activities and self-guided tours.

In addition, the aquarium is hosting its seventh annual Autumn Sea Fair on Sunday, with kids' activities, puppet shows, games, music, sand-sculpting contests and the Queen of the Sea pageant.

Not too bad for a little aquarium — started nearly 70 years ago with a lifeguard's seashell collection — that today welcomes about 250,000 visitors annually. The aquarium, part of the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, receives funding from both public and private sources.

Although the new facility will be able to accommodate more visitors, another important reason for the expansion, says aquarium director Susanne Lawrenz-Miller, is the ability to provide more public involvement.

"We want to offer opportunities for people of any age to try their hand at research, to volunteer to raise sea animals, to really learn about the ocean life around us," Lawrenz-Miller says. "We want people to think of this aquarium as their own."

No doubt kids will delight in the exploration center, where they can frolic like a sea worm in a giant mudflat, dress up like a pipefish or sea slug, and present a puppet show with aquatic creatures.

But the center also offers more cerebral activities, including microscopes with video cameras for a look at live sea creatures, a wide array of boxes filled with learning materials, "discovery boxes" and educational displays.

The idea of the center is to get learners of all ages fired up about nature and then send them on their way, says education specialist Linda Chilton.

"We have such a variety of ocean life right within walking distance of the aquarium — nearby tide pools, salt marshes, fishing piers, beaches," Chilton says. "We want people to learn something here and then go out there and see it for themselves."

To that end, the aquarium loans out educational backpacks to visitors, which contain binoculars, field guides, magnifying glasses and data sheets for families who want to take an exploratory walk by the sea.

In addition to discovering natural surroundings, families and kids can put on their science hats at the aquatic nursery. Here, the low electrical hum of holding tanks, dripping water and exposed water pipes add to the laboratory atmosphere.

Tanks of baby moon jellies, pipefish, grunion and halibut are displayed alongside microscopes that serve for casual observations and scientific research.

"We're raising young marine life and young scientists here," says exhibits director Mike Schaadt, who helps students conduct experiments.

"We might have a class of young people who want to work with octopuses. We can set them up with a space to raise and investigate them by comparing and contrasting behaviors.

"Kids tell us what fascinates them, and we'll do our best to work with them on a project."

The small aquarium staff has always enlisted outside help for scientific research. For many years, students and families have participated in annual field projects including testing water quality and collecting data on sea life populations.

Indoors, students from elementary school to college have helped with experiments, says Schaadt, most notably developing techniques for in vitro fertilization of jellyfish and growing micro algae as a food supply.

"This is just a logical bridge of what we have been offering to the public all along," Schaadt says. "We want to keep this momentum going."

Even with a new facility, staffers think of the aquarium as homey and intimate, a place where people can still comfortably bring their buckets with captured or found sea creatures to the aquarium.

"Our advisory panel told us to never lose our 'bucket' aspect," Lawrenz-Miller says. "We love it when people get excited about something they found. We want to be that place where people can always come with a bucket and a question."

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Cabrillo Marine Aquarium

Special events

- **10 a.m. Saturday:** Public opening of aquarium's expansion project
- **10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday:** Autumn Sea Fair

**Where:** 3720 Stephen White Drive, San Pedro

**Price:** Suggested donation of \$5 for adults, \$1 for children

**Info:** (310) 548-7562 or [www.cabrilloaq.org](http://www.cabrilloaq.org).

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