

SHEDD AQUARIUM RIDES HERD ON SEAHORSE CONSERVATION EFFORTS

In its 75-year history, Shedd Aquarium has taken part in many conservation efforts, but its involvement in seahorse conservation is surely one of the most far-reaching.

With the head of a horse, the tail of a monkey, the pouch of a kangaroo, and the eyes of a chameleon, seahorses have intrigued people for millennia. Unfortunately, these delicate, sedentary animals are victim to people's fascination: in 2001, more than 24 million seahorses were taken from the wild. Most were used for traditional medicine and personal aquariums or were sold as souvenirs; others were unintentionally caught in nets intended for other fish.

Until recently, little was known about seahorse biology or behavior; all marine biologists knew was that seahorses were in trouble. All of the 32 known species of seahorses appeared on the 2002 World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species as Endangered, Vulnerable or Data Deficient.

In the late-1990s, John G. Shedd Aquarium teamed up with Project Seahorse, an international organization dedicated to studying and protecting seahorses while helping people who depend upon them for their livelihoods. These partners complemented each other, with Shedd Aquarium bringing strengths in communication, exhibitry, husbandry and education, and Project Seahorse leading in field conservation, policy and research.

The collaboration coincided with Shedd's opening of *Seahorse Symphony* in 1998, which was the largest seahorse exhibit of its type in the world. The exhibit celebrated these extraordinary animals and explored the threats that they face. Globally, seahorses are threatened by overfishing, habitat loss and degradation and bycatch. The exhibit highlighted the work of Project Seahorse and demonstrated that by saving seahorses, we can save the oceans that they and so many other plants and animals rely upon. .

When the temporary exhibit *Seahorse Symphony* opened in 1998, public aquariums knew very little about how to care for seahorses or seadragons. Through their award-winning partnership, Shedd Aquarium and Project Seahorse were instrumental in developing the first of its kind seahorse husbandry manual for professional aquariums. The manual was a direct result of the collaborations and networks that the organizations formed, as well as the knowledge gained through Shedd's care of the animals in *Seahorse Symphony*. The manual is now used widely as a reference by other public aquariums.

In 2002, the Shedd Aquarium/Project Seahorse partnership successfully secured all 32 species of seahorses for protection under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), which lists species whose trade must be managed to ensure their survival. Of all wildlife trade issues under international conservation management, seahorses represent the greatest volume: more than 24 million animals are traded each year among at least 77 nations.

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Further, Shedd Aquarium funds a community-based conservation program run by Project Seahorse in a remote seahorse-fishing village in the Philippines. As an exciting part of the program Shedd's gift shops sell crafts made by Filipino seahorse fisher families, allowing those who rely on the sea for their income to make a living without having to catch as many seahorses. The community-based project also supports research biologists, community organizers and high school student scholars in coordinated programs that seek to strengthen this community, as well as the marine habitat that surrounds it.

Rounding out the partnership are programs that are international in scope and scale. Education, aquarium research, field research and policy have all been advanced through this collaboration.

Shedd Aquarium's *Seahorse Symphony* exhibit ended its five-year run in January 2003, but visitors loved it so much that Shedd is making a permanent home for the seahorses. The new, permanent seahorse exhibit, *Seahorses and Seadragons*, opening in early 2005, will be home to six different species of seahorses: pipefish, snipefish, trumpetfish, leafy seadragons, potbelly seadragons and weedy seadragons.

Seahorses and Seadragons will not only help educate visitors about these delicate animals, but will also encourage them to support seahorse and seadragon conservation. By making a permanent home for these fascinating creatures, Shedd Aquarium intends to continue educating guests about the challenges seahorses and seadragons face in the wild.

Who would have guessed that one exhibit launched years ago at Shedd Aquarium could have led so many people to support seahorse conservation and care more about the oceans? Thanks to Shedd Aquarium and Project Seahorse, tremendous enthusiasm has been generated for these fascinating animals, the professional aquarium community has galvanized to learn more about their care and conservation, and their remarkable collaboration has advanced marine conservation around the world.

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