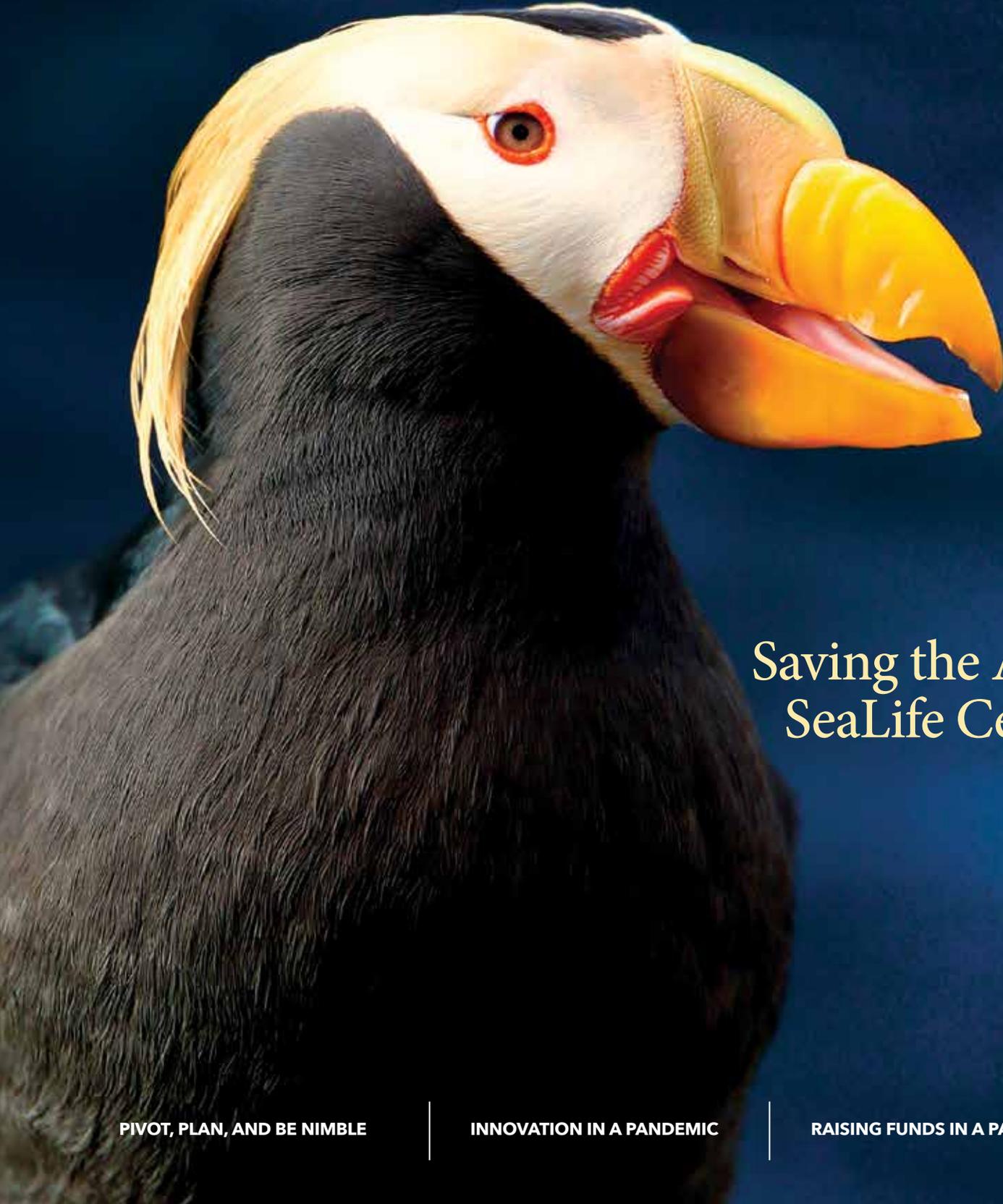


Connect

FEBRUARY 2021

A publication of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums



Saving the Alaska
SeaLife Center

PIVOT, PLAN, AND BE NIMBLE

INNOVATION IN A PANDEMIC

RAISING FUNDS IN A PANDEMIC

CONTENTS

February 2021



Features

20

Saving the Alaska SeaLife Center

The Center has endeared itself to droves of people over the last 28 years with its 4,000 resident animals and its dedication to cutting-edge marine biology research. But when COVID-19 started spreading in mid-March 2020, the seasonality, location, and mostly indoor operations made the situation quickly dire in terms of revenue.

BY KATIE MORELL

28

Pivot, Plan, and Be Nimble

When an Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited facility is hit by a crisis, colleagues quickly step up to provide whatever they need—manpower, supplies, or space to house animals. The pandemic is the first time every member of our community, along with individuals and organizations the world over, is facing the same challenge.

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

36

Innovation in a Pandemic

The Commercial Member Engagement Council was created as a way for Association of Zoos and Aquariums commercial members to bring innovation and insight to the community at large. In 2020, after two years of planning, the CMEC faced its first major challenge: COVID-19.

BY HILLARY RICHARD

40

Raising Funds in a Pandemic

The dire economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Association of Zoos and Aquarium-accredited facilities—most were closed from mid-March for at least three months—has forced institutions' staff to brainstorm events that can raise money, engage community members, and be conducted safely.

BY ALINA TUGEND





PIVOT **PLAN**
AND BE
Nimble

Creating a
Safe and
Secure Visitor
Experience

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

W

hen an Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited facility is hit hard by a hurricane, earthquake, or fire, their zoo and aquarium colleagues quickly step up to provide whatever they need—manpower, supplies, or space to house animals. The pandemic is the first time every member of our community, along with individuals and organizations the world over, is facing the same crisis.

Zoo and aquarium leaders spent the enforced closures last spring looking to the future and reimagining every aspect of the way they do business. Knowing that their facilities could offer the public some much-needed respite and entertainment, they faced the

unprecedented challenge of reopening in a way that will protect the health of visitors, staff, and volunteers and the animals in their collections.

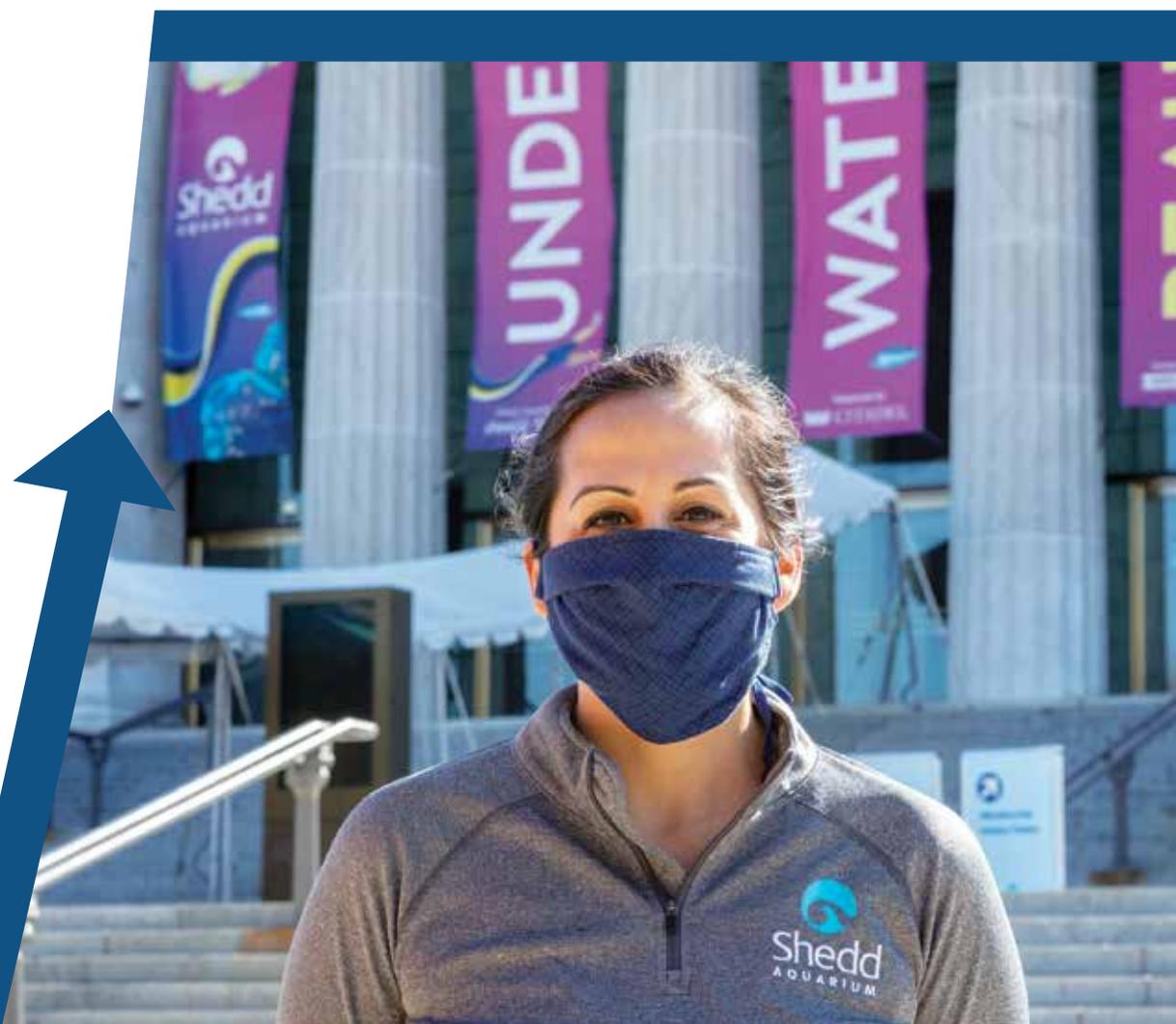
“It’s a balancing act. I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Glenn Dobrogosz, chief executive officer of the Greensboro Science Center in Greensboro, N.C. “We’re trying to remain optimistic. Nature’s been through this for eons and when nature is tested, it either wins or goes extinct. We have to win and come out stronger. We had to make tough decisions, but everyone was behind us, and we are confident that we made the right decisions.”

Like Dobrogosz, leaders in the AZA community focused on winning by creating new ways to

experience their facilities. Thanks to their efforts, thousands of visitors can be reassured that their local zoos and aquariums are offering fun and entertainment with an emphasis on health and safety.

Communication is Key

When they reopened, facilities had to communicate frequently and visibly to make sure visitors understood and complied with a wide range of modifications. New signage was key everywhere with the Seattle Aquarium* and many others opting for clever graphics to remind people about the six-foot rule, e.g., “stay a wolf eel distance apart.”

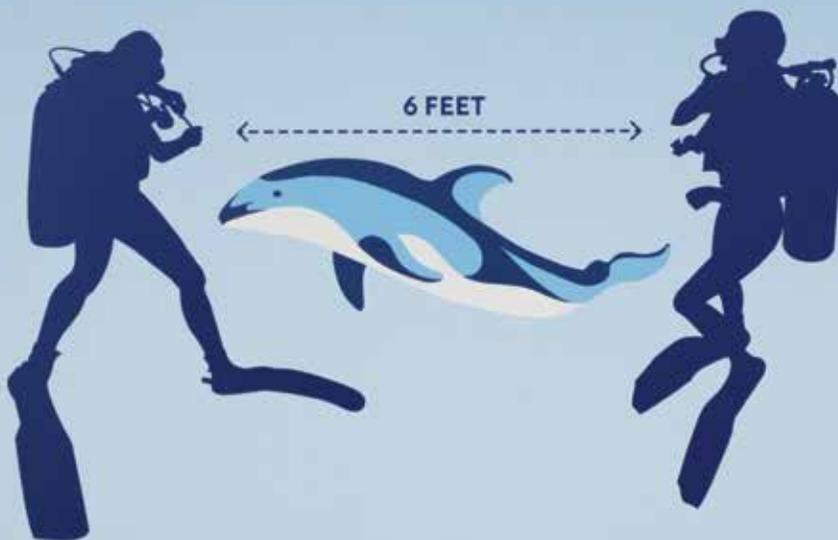




© Shedd Aquarium



Social distancing the Shedd Aquarium way



**Maintain 1 dolphin length
between yourself and others.**

(scuba gear optional)

© Shedd Aquarium

In order to accommodate visitors who wanted to be prepared before they arrived, the Greensboro Science Center's team put Safety in Focus, their very detailed reopening plans, on their website. The document provides information on everything from sanitization protocols to traffic around "at risk" animal exhibits. Dobrogosz also placed a priority on communicating with the community via letters to the editor and messages to members that emphasized the Center's commitment to beating pandemic-related adversity and ultimately thriving.

Crowd Control

Controlling the direction, pace, and number of visitors requires different measures for different types of institutions. "We designed a one-directional flow, and used straw bales to keep people going in one direction, to keep them backed up from animal exhibits like the great apes, and to spread people out," said Bert Vescolani, president and chief executive officer, Denver Zoo. "When we heard that Waterworld was not going to reopen, we said, 'What if we could borrow some of their lifeguard chairs?' It was a very clever tool that



© Shedd Aquarium

gave our staff a birds' eye view to monitor the flow of people.”

For the Endangered Wolf Center in Eureka, Mo., executive director Mark Cross said, “The majority of the time our guests are outside, which has been a tremendous advantage for us. When we reopened in June, we eliminated all public tours and large tours of up to 30 people. We started offering only private tours—typically

for a family—with a cap of 10 people in the group and one tour guide. People walk down a two-lane road to the enclosures, and there’s plenty of room to social distance.”

Some institutions, including the Seattle Aquarium in Seattle, Wash., and the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Md., set their attendance level below that required by their respective governors out of an



© Shedd Aquarium

abundance of caution for the safety of their guests, staff, and volunteers.

Seattle was allowed to open at 25 percent, and opted to stay at 15 percent; and National kept attendance 25 percent instead of the allowable 50 percent.

Hands Off

Like most institutions, Rolling Hills Zoo in Selena, Kan., closed their animal feeding experiences and significantly increased the cleaning and sanitizing of every touch point in the institution, from strollers to soda machines to high touch windows in the animal exhibits. Their open, fairly rural location not only made it easier

for visitors to experience the Zoo, it also facilitated programming in their Wildlife Museum.

“We had planned on hosting a temporary exhibit, Return of the Dinosaurs, in our gallery space, and it was initially to be here from May through Labor Day,” said Interim Director, Kathy Tolbert. “We worked with the vendor and pushed the opening to 4 July and we moved it all outside. That allowed families to enjoy the dinosaurs in an open air space with plenty of room to social distance.”

Timed ticketing has also been a successful strategy for many institutions, as has reliance on apps for maps and food ordering. “As part of the planning for our expansion, we had already planned to institute timed ticketing,” said

Bob Davidson, president and chief executive officer, Seattle Aquarium, “and this touchless system has been very helpful. We went from less than three percent online sales to 100 percent online.”

Shedd Aquarium Chief Executive Officer, Bridget Coughlin, reports that visitors can now go through the entire facility without touching anything. “[We have] touchless ticket with phone scanning; bathroom doors all have a foot pull installed at the base so you pull open the door with the sole of your shoe; and hand sanitation stations are foot pump activated.” She adds that an important change people can’t see involved changing the air system filter from a MERV 11 to a MERV 13 and conforming



to the COVID-19 reopening standards issued by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air Conditioning Engineers.

Mask Up

Many staff are still working at home, but those on site must be masked whenever they're not in their own offices. Visitors across the board are also required to be masked, and most institutions report little, if any resistance from their guests. "We told the staff they were empowered and expected to remind people to wear masks, and keep them up," said John Racanelli, president and chief executive officer, National Aquarium. "We all do it. We'll do whatever we need to do up to and including escorting someone out. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of problems we've had."

*Seattle Aquarium and Woodland Park Zoo opened in the summer and closed again in November because of a governor's mandate.



At the Endangered Wolf Center, Cross said, “Everyone is required to wear a mask, but we let people have a brief mask break during the portion of the walk that’s on a paved road, especially during the hot weather. Everyone’s been very respectful. Only one group balked and once we had a conversation with them, they decided to reschedule.”

Michele Smith, chief financial officer, Woodland Park Zoo* reports that her the team followed a one strike rule for mask violators.

“We didn’t want guests policing other guests, and that had happened. If we asked someone to put a mask on and they didn’t comply, we asked them to leave and come back when they can comply to the rules. While this decision was made to minimize risk and add extra safety for staff, guests, and animals, we found it was an insurmountable

obstacle for some members of our disability community. With help and consultation from partners in the local disability rights community, we were able to add reserved weekly hours to accommodate those with disabilities that prevent them from wearing a mask.” They plan to offer longer accommodation hours on a quarterly basis in 2021.

Staff Support

Leaders agree that providing staff with the support they needed to operate in a new environment was a critical aspect of their reopening plans. “We created a digital communication tool for staff to log social distance and compliance issues so we could address them internally,” said Vescolani.

The Seattle Aquarium required every staff member to go through customer service and safety training

before returning to their jobs. “They were also supported by the creation of an Incident Command System run by the director of facilities. They would meet every day to make decisions about issues that arose,” said Davidson.

Redeploying staff has been a common strategy to keep people working while also having enough people available to enforce safety restrictions. Woodland Park Zoo allowed any furloughed staff member to take on the new role of social distance attendant, and also hired new staff to fill some of those positions. At the National Aquarium, 70 non-operational staff who were working their regular jobs at home came onsite to do three or four guest services shifts per week.

As we enter another year under COVID-related restrictions and accommodations, good news about vaccines gives us a reason to be hopeful. The lessons we learned in 2020 have proven AZA member institutions’ ability to remain flexible while successfully tackling unexpected challenges. Racanelli echoes other leaders when he credits the efforts of his staff for making sure the doors could open again.

“We had to embrace a new normal because change is persistent, perpetual, and exponential,” said Racanelli. “By embracing the idea that this is the new normal, our staff brought together a phenomenal plan for us to become a space that was safe, fulfilling, and a beacon of hope. We envision change will continue forever and we’re going to keep adapting forever.”

**Seattle Aquarium and Woodland Park Zoo opened in the summer and closed again in November because of a governor’s mandate.*

Mary Ellen Collins is a writer based in St. Petersburg, Fla.