



# TENNESSEE AQUARIUM

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



Keith Sanford, CEO

Valoria Armstrong, Chair



# FORWARD

Living in this exquisite corner of Southern Appalachia, it can be easy to take the beauty and life surrounding us for granted. Standing together on the rocky shoulder of Lookout Mountain in the glow of the setting sun, however, the splendor of the Tennessee Valley was impossible to ignore.

Sights like that epitomize how special our home is and serve as an inspiration for the conservation science and education roles we fulfill through the Aquarium's mission. Fittingly, this moment was captured during our board retreat, a time when our trustees and senior leadership gathered to consider how to build upon our past successes.

With that landscape as our breathtaking backdrop, we spent several days enthusiastically discussing our long-term goals through a master planning process.

Together, concepts for the next ten years, and beyond, began taking shape. It's exciting to work towards a future that will enhance our experience and programs while positioning us to remain among the ranks of the nation's finest and most impactful aquariums.

Crafting our master plan is a complex, lengthy undertaking, but we recognize how crucial it is to chart an ambitious path forward. Those of us at the retreat were not working in a vacuum. Recognizing the immense importance of this process to our future success, our long-term plans are being informed and shaped by input and feedback from team members in all departments, as well as from our partners, former board members, and trustees.

We are energized by the concepts that are forming and by the process of bringing all our stakeholders together for the betterment of our community and region. We look forward to sharing details of this roadmap with you as they are finalized and, as always, thank you for your continuing trust and support.

Entering 2023, we were brimming with excitement at the grand opening of our much-anticipated new gallery: Ridges to Rivers.

Since our inception, we've prided ourselves as the world's premiere freshwater aquarium. In keeping with that role, the long-awaited transformation of Discovery Hall allowed us to shine a welcome spotlight on our own backyard by showcasing the diverse, beautiful fish of Southern Appalachia.

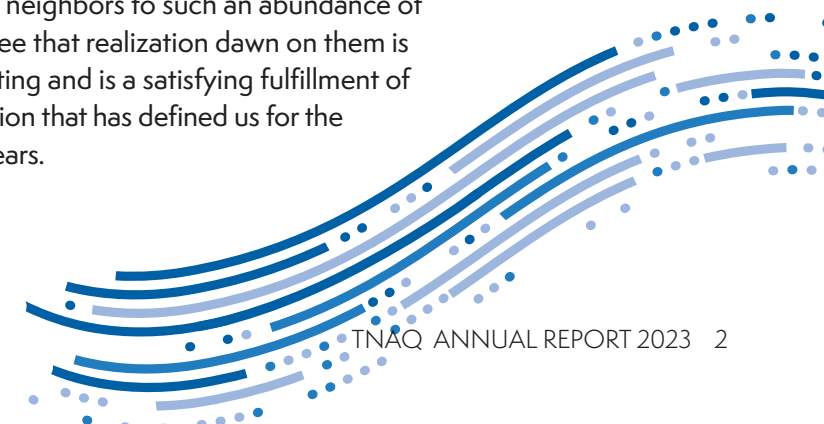
This inspiring collection of multi-sensory exhibits was conceived to show the unparalleled—and often underappreciated—aquatic life of our region to our guests, whether they live here or are visiting from around the globe.

Our aquarists and scientists are some of the lucky few who have explored the Southeast's underwater rainforest by snorkeling in its rivers and streams. Ridges to Rivers offers the same eye-opening experience to

hundreds of thousands of visitors without putting on a dive mask and wetsuit.

It's a consistent thrill to walk through this newest addition to River Journey and see guests' enthusiasm as they watch neon-bright Rainbow Shiners schooling during an artificial thunderstorm, get nose-close to curious Tangerine Darters swimming against the current or feel the leathery skin of an ancient Lake Sturgeon.

Many of the species in this gallery reside in streams and rivers our visitors live next to or pass by every day, often without knowing they are neighbors to such an abundance of life. To see that realization dawn on them is exhilarating and is a satisfying fulfillment of the mission that has defined us for the last 31 years.



# CONSERVATION

As always, our drive to connect people with freshwater life extends to our long-standing commitment to better understand and protect it. In that sense, 2023 was a year defined by our expansive efforts to study and advocate for aquatic species throughout our region, whether our scientists were presenting papers in Norfolk, Virginia, searching for endangered Cavefish in Alabama, or assisting a Canadian graduate student studying Sand Darters from Kentucky to Mississippi.

In 2022, we proudly announced our role assisting the U.S. Department of Agriculture in a five-year plan to disperse \$10 million to Southeast Tennessee landowners through a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). This program shares its name with our new gallery, Ridges to Rivers, and aims to help farmers implement land-management practices that will promote better yields while also improving water quality in nearby streams.

This year, scientists at the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute (TNACI) mapped out areas of highest priority to which funding should be directed when the program becomes active in 2024. We also traveled extensively throughout the seven-county area targeted by the RCPP to attend county fairs, agricultural festivals, and other events to directly connect with farmers. These efforts helped raise awareness about the program and encouraged landowners to seek future funding to fuel water-friendly improvements on their property.

The Ridges to Rivers' target area includes counties on or abutting Walden Ridge, where our scientists continued to focus their research in 2023.



Lake Sturgeon juvenile



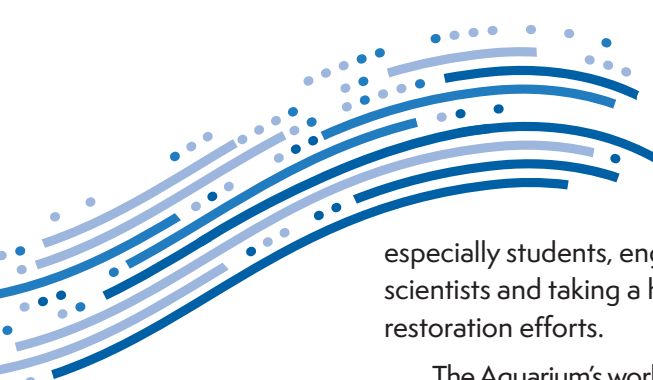
Our biologists teamed up with Auburn University's Cooperative Fish Disease Lab to sample streams on the ridge for parasites and diseases that may be impacting the endangered Laurel Dace, which scientists consider one of North America's 10 most highly imperiled fish species. Some of this work is being supported by assistance from students participating in the environmental track of Baylor School's Baylor Research Program.

Throughout the summer and fall, TNACI conducted a study of how aquatic species move through road culverts on Walden Ridge. We have identified a pair of these waterway crossings for replacement, in the coming year, through a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. One of the problematic culverts will be removed in 2024 and

exchanged for a new design that will allow free movement of aquatic species to spawn and feed.

Our 23-year effort to raise and release Lake Sturgeon continued this year with some notable improvements to their temporary home at our freshwater field station. The addition of extra filtration and larger, deeper tanks will ensure the juveniles we raise enjoy the best possible water quality and have extra room to swim prior to their release.

In October, local students and curious passersby joined us for a well-attended public release of hundreds of our latest class of Lake Sturgeon into the Tennessee River. It's always a delight to see the community,



especially students, engaging with our scientists and taking a hand in our wildlife restoration efforts.

The Aquarium's work to protect Tennessee's only native trout species, the Southern Appalachian Brook Trout, also passed noteworthy milestones in 2023. In the spring, we wrapped up reintroduction work in the southern reaches of the Cherokee National Forest with the release of 1,300 baby trout. Our past three years of work have restored an

additional 3.2 miles of range to the Southern Appalachian Brook Trout, a nearly 33% increase over what the area previously hosted.

In anticipation of focusing our efforts on a new location in the coming years, we traveled to the Nolichucky River system near the North Carolina border to collect wild adult Southern Appalachian Brook Trout. We successfully spawned this broodstock in the fall, an important start to the next chapter of restoring this beautiful fish to more of its historical range.



## Fostering Future Freshwater Scientists

Throughout 2023, biologists from the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute served as invaluable on-site and in-field mentors for area students.

Early in the year, our scientists worked in frigid streams atop Walden Ridge alongside young researchers from the Baylor School. There, TNACI specialists demonstrated how to use environmental DNA filtration, which the students intended to use to detect the presence in streams of the federally endangered Laurel Dace. This kind of inspirational exchange of knowledge will be crucial to the long-term study and restoration of one of North America's most-imperiled fish species by the next generation of freshwater scientists.

Later in the year, our conservation manager escorted students from McCallie School into the field to sample for macroinvertebrates in pristine and degraded streams. The contrast between these declining and healthy ecosystems offered a crucial on-the-ground perspective of the impacts of ecological change in our waterways.

Throughout the year, TNACI scientists collaborated extensively with PhD student Britney Firth from the University of Waterloo

in Ontario, Canada. Her study of five Sand Darter species saw our scientists assisting with data collection on the species' thermal tolerance at sites across the Southeast, from central Alabama and Kentucky to the Florida Panhandle.

Closer to home, TNACI staff hosted student and summer camp tours and coordinated with universities for on-site research at our cutting-edge conservation science headquarters on the banks of the Tennessee River.

Among this year's academic visitors were sustainable aquaculture and freshwater ecology students from the University of Georgia and a group of high school science educators who were presented with information on our Ridges to Rivers Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The facility's living stream systems also were heavily utilized this year as part of a collaborative investigation with the University of the South into the compounding effects of invasive species and changes to water flow and substrate.



# EDUCATION

Our value as an educational resource continues to grow. Last year, we celebrated numerous opportunities to inspire students at all stages of their academic journey, whether it was our scientists teaching high schoolers to filter genetic evidence of aquatic life from a stream or third graders touching the scales of a King Snake during an animal encounter in our auditorium.

In April, we joined representatives from several state and federal wildlife agencies at Park Creek Elementary School in Dalton, Georgia, for an Earth Day Jamboree celebrating native flora and fauna.

Throughout the day, our educators and scientists responded to a buzz of excited questions from the students as they were shown skeletons and shells, looked at aquatic animals collected from a nearby creek, and interacted with native species visiting from the Aquarium.

Closer to home, our expanded team of educators added unexpected value to guests' visits with the launch of a new and refreshed "curiosity cart" in-gallery program. These unscheduled encounters yield countless moments of surprise and delight through engaging presentations about natural processes or up-close interactions with a wide range of species from our Ambassador Animal program.

Thousands of students explored the River Journey and Ocean Journey buildings as part of school groups in 2023. We have long celebrated our ability to attract guests to Chattanooga at a national and even

international level, but it was still a thrill to see reports of students touring our campus from as far away as New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and even Washington state.

Throughout the year, we hosted more than 160 behind-the-scenes guided tours and had more than 1,800 participants during our schedule of more than 50 Sleep in the Deep overnight visits. After their return in 2022, this year's slate of winter and summer camps were a beehive of activity that saw more than 600 youngsters enjoying exciting programs, backstage experiences, and one-on-one interactions with our staff members.

Our education department's reach extended beyond our campus, too. We added four additional educators to our community engagement team. These outreach specialists connected with more than 10,000 people in three states through programming at schools, community centers, and other venues in our region. These in-person visits ensure we are able to inspire and serve community members who may not, for whatever reason, be able to visit us in Chattanooga.



## Cleaning Up the Tennessee River

The Tennessee River is an invaluable resource to our community and to the aquatic life it harbors. In 2023, our team members contributed their time and effort to the Tennessee River Rescue, the longest-running annual cleanup of this storied waterway.

This year marked the Rescue's 35th anniversary. To spur broader participation from area residents, Aquarium staff converged downtown for a publicized effort along a wide-swath of the waterway's southern shore. At a riverside ceremony prior to the Aquarium-led effort, Chattanooga Mayor

Tim Kelly officially proclaimed the days leading up to the official event to be Tennessee River Rescue Week.

This year's cleanup saw hundreds of volunteers working to remove refuse from the river at 36 sites across six counties.



# HUSBANDRY SUCCESSES

Since the River Journey building opened its doors in 1992, North American River Otters have been the first animals guests encountered during their tour. Until 2023, however, River Otter Falls was only home to male otters, so we were thrilled in September to announce the exhibit's newest addition — and first female resident — Sunshine. She immediately lived up to her name through displays of youthful energy and playful interactions with guests. Now that she has integrated successfully into our romp, we are hopeful for the possibility of pups in the coming years.



Longhead Darters

In addition to the new Ridges to Rivers gallery, our husbandry team celebrated two more exhibit milestones in 2023. In the fall, exhibits in the River Journey building became the only place in the world where guests could get close-up views of the Longhead Darter and Sicklefin Redhorse. Our exhibit of these native fishes sets an important precedent that will establish broader awareness and appreciation of these threatened species.

As a sign of their comfort under our care, it's always a special moment when one of our animals reproduces, and 2023 saw the arrival of many adorable babies. Our world-class collection of freshwater turtles swelled with

the hatching of a single Yellow-blotched Map Turtle, two critically endangered Arakan Forest Turtles and six critically endangered Four-eyed Turtles.

In the Ocean Journey building, we had a highly successful year hatching a shiver of shark pups. Our aquarists were thrilled at the arrival of eight tiny, biofluorescent Swell Sharks, the first we've successfully hatched for this species. They were joined by half a dozen Chain Catsharks and a trio of critically endangered Short-tail Nurse Sharks.

The wellbeing of our animals is always top-of-mind for our staff, and we undertook new and novel approaches in 2023 to provide the highest standards of nutrition and veterinary care for our residents.

Early in the year, our horticulture team saw an opportunity in some otherwise-unused square footage in our off-site greenhouse facilities. Recognizing the tremendous expense incurred every year to pay for the Aquarium's food budget, they launched an in-house organic farming initiative. Thanks to their efforts, our animals now benefit from fresh produce grown on site and delivered directly to their caretakers, whether that's greens for our lemurs, bell peppers for our Radiated Tortoises, or cherry tomatoes for our Pacu.

Because of their access to world-class veterinary treatment, many of our residents far exceed their species' median life expectancy in human care. As with humans, elderly animals tend to experience a decline in mobility and other conditions that come with advanced age. To better accommodate the needs of our geriatric residents, we integrated new equipment and care regimens into our veterinary toolkit in 2023.

Early in the year, a generous donation from a long-time volunteer allowed us to acquire a cold laser therapy machine that



produced promising results during an earlier trial period. This equipment uses skin-penetrating wavelengths of light to reduce inflammation and stimulate blood flow. Short weekly sessions with this device have been remarkably effective at non-invasively treating arthritis and other conditions impacting the mobility of our oldest lemur, Lyra, and our other aging animals—even tortoises.

Later in the year, we acquired a digital x-ray imaging system, which allows us to create radiographs of our animals on site rather than in our veterinary office. With this new tool, our veterinary staff can quickly—and more frequently—assess our animals' condition while minimizing the impact of stress caused by removing them from their habitats.





## 27 Million Guests (and Counting)

When the Aquarium opened its doors 31 years ago, hopes for its success hinged on the response from the public, locally and farther afield. Our first year of operation saw an immediate wave of enthusiastic support, and in the years since, we have become firmly established as a tremendously attractive destination for visitors from around the globe. In March, we celebrated the arrival of our 27 millionth guest, a family from North Carolina.



# PARTNERSHIPS



Whether by working hand in glove with federal and state agencies or joining forces with Southeastern researchers to locate and study imperiled species, partnerships form the bedrock of our role as leaders in Southeastern freshwater science.

From microplastic pollution to soil erosion, we have long sought to raise awareness of how our activity on land impacts aquatic life in nearby waters. Nowhere is that better represented than our extensive partnership with the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT).

After collaborating to demonstrate how road litter affects the state's many waterways, we expanded our work with TDOT last year to spotlight the importance of native pollinators. To kick off National Pollinator Week

in June, we launched the Pollinator Pathway, a permanent self-guided experience on our plaza. Through colorful signage, we show guests the amazing adaptations and surprising benefits of pollinators while offering suggestions for how to protect them and entice them to their homes.

Early in 2023, our aquarium plaza maintenance supervisor collected seeds from our pollinator-friendly, native landscaped plants. In November, hundreds of seedlings were given away for free during a special "Plantsgiving" celebration. Based on data shared with us by recipients of these baby plants, our seedlings ultimately found their way to homes and gardens across the country, from Los Angeles and Seattle to Philadelphia and South Florida.



For 27 years, the IMAX® 3D Theater has presented cinematic offerings that amplify the experience guests have while exploring the River Journey and Ocean Journey buildings. Following the global pandemic, we seized the opportunity to present more first-run feature films on our six-story screen.

In 2023, our theater presented 26 giant-screen films, a 40% increase over 2022. Regularly offering these feature films as a supplement to our scientific and environmental programming has firmly established us as a premiere destination for giant-screen moviegoers throughout the region.

We made further investments in the theatergoing experience in 2023 to prioritize guests' comfort during their cinematic adventure. During a brief closure in the fall, we replaced our theater's 13-year-old

seats with wider, taller models made of easier-to-clean vinyl. Other aspects of the theater were also updated, including the installation of new vinyl flooring, refreshed paint in the lobby and updated signage and decorative elements.

In addition to offering more films, we also made a concerted effort in 2023 to leverage our theater's drawing power to reach more facets of our community. We presented a Spanish-language screening of the comic book blockbuster *Blue Beetle*, a first for our theater that we hope to repeat in the future. In keeping with our proud certification as a sensory-inclusive facility through Birmingham, Alabama-based Kulture City, we were pleased in 2023 to offer a sensory-friendly, giant-screen presentation of the popular TV program *Wild Kratts*.



## Special Guests Elevate Our IMAX Offerings

It's always a thrill when the Aquarium can host special guests for the launch of a new film at the IMAX® 3D Theater. These visits and post-screening presentations give audiences valuable insights into the unique challenges of producing for the giant screen and a chance to form a more personal connection with filmmakers.

To kick off the year, the Aquarium whisked audiences to the wildlife-rich plains of Africa in *Serengeti 3D: Journey to the Heart of Africa*. As part of the launch celebration in January, the film's cinematographer, Michael Dalton-Smith, visited the Aquarium. During a Q&A session with audience members, he discussed his deep-rooted love of the Serengeti and what it was like to film completely alone in one of the world's most storied landscapes thanks to travel lockdowns brought on by the global pandemic.

Just before Memorial Day, the Aquarium premiered *Secrets of the Sea 3D* with the help of one of the film's directors—and underwater filming savant—Jonathan Bird. A burgeoning talent in the giant-screen space, Bird is also well-known for his popular YouTube channel *Jonathan Bird's Blue World*, which has more than 1.2 million subscribers. In addition to wowing audiences with stories of visiting sites all over the world for *Secrets of the Sea*, Bird also found time to film content for *Blue World* during his visit. He released the first of two planned episodes in August and focused on the Aquarium's effort to raise its own marine fishes in-house. In short order, the episode garnered more than 37,000 views and 130 comments.






# LOOKING AHEAD



## Organizational Changes



At the close to a year filled with so many accomplishments and celebratory moments, we now must consider the role we will play in years to come, not only as an economic driver and world-class caretaker of our living collection but also — increasingly — beyond our campus as a steward of the public's trust when it comes to environmental information and conservation action.

The most recent market research regarding attitudes, awareness, and perceptions of the Aquarium shows that we have achieved our highest-ever ratings for reliability as a trusted conservation organization. This data suggests that the public recognizes the Aquarium's

work in protecting and restoring aquatic wildlife. And, this affords us more leadership opportunities to educate our guests and social followers. In short, we help them make informed decisions and adopt behaviors that are best for the environment.

We do not take this reputational responsibility for granted.

As we look to the future, we will do our utmost to continue inspiring the public and building on our mission to forge meaningful, lasting connections between our guests and the natural world.

In 2023, there were several important changes to the Aquarium's senior staff and executive leadership. Long-time Chief Financial Officer Gordon Stalans was appointed as Chief Operating Officer. Former Director of Aquatic Collections and Life Support Systems Thom Demas was appointed as the Aquarium's Chief Husbandry & Exhibits Officer.

Jeff Worley, formerly Manager of Exhibit Services, was promoted to Director of Exhibits & Graphics. In the IMAX® 3D Theater, IMAX Senior Operator & Manager Corey Cobb was named Director of IMAX® Operations. The theater's day-to-day operations are now being overseen by

IMAX® Manager & Systems Operator Adam Lundy, who formerly served as Assistant Manager & IMAX® Operator.

By elevating veteran team members to these positions, their extensive experience will ensure the Aquarium operates from a position of strength in years to come.

# DRIVING SUCCESS

Tourism was stronger than expected in the first two months of the year, setting the tone for what ended up being the second-best fiscal year in the Aquarium's history. Attendance in 2023 was up 4% compared to budget and 1% stronger than the previous year. IMAX attendance was down 5% compared to the previous year, but this was partially due to being closed while we replaced seating and flooring in the theater. IMAX attendance was 13% stronger than 2022.

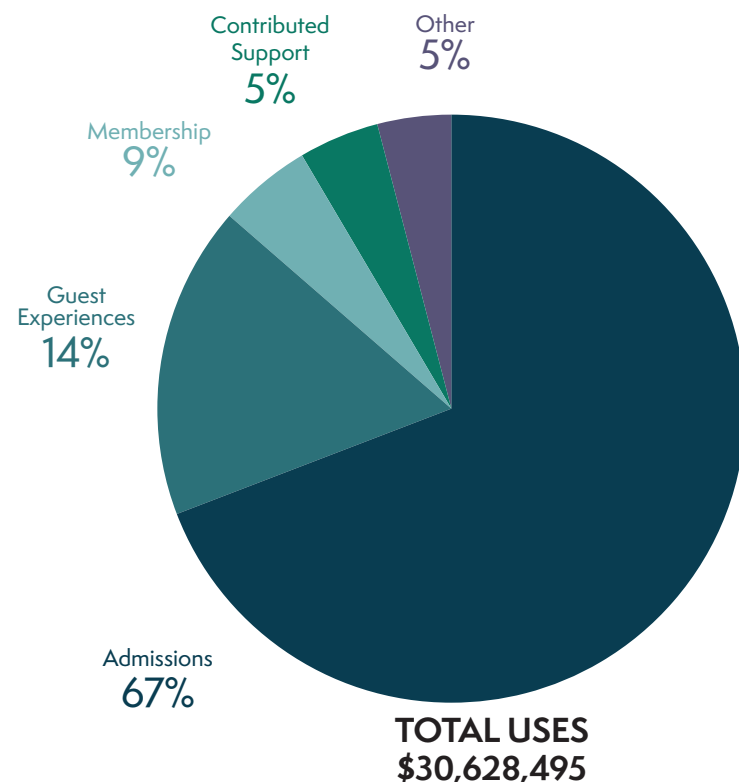
While our operating revenues were 7% better than forecast, our operating costs, debt service, and capital expenditures were

all lower than budgeted. As a result, our net surplus from operations in 2023 was \$4.4 million. That was \$3.3 million higher than our budget and approximately 20% higher than the previous year.

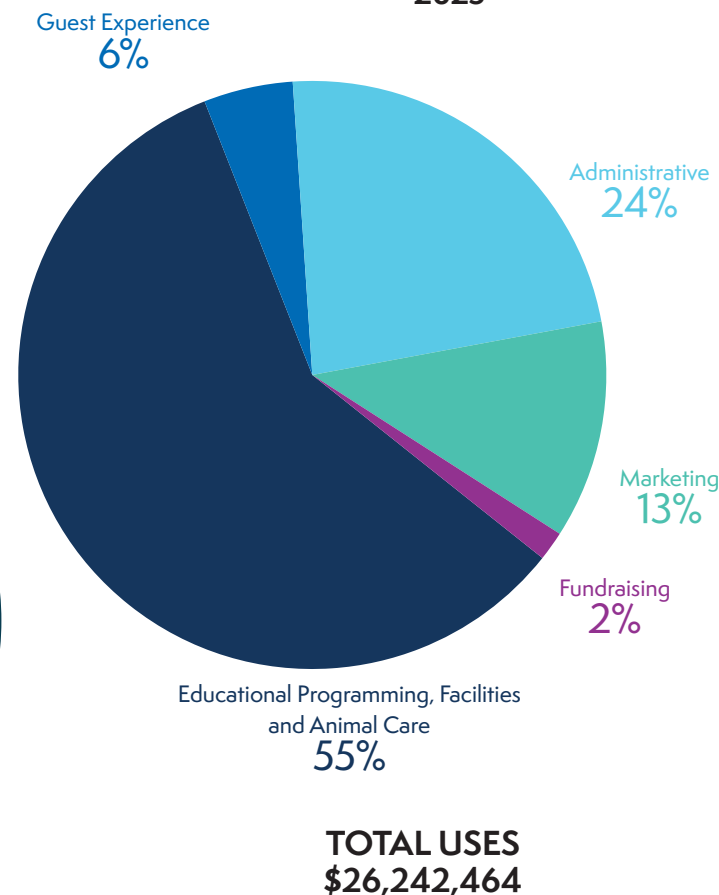
This surplus allows us to continue to improve our financial stability and allows us to effectively deliver on our mission by continuing to invest in our facilities, staff, and programs.

—Gordon Stalans, Vice President, CFO/COO

## TENNESSEE AQUARIUM SOURCES OF OPERATING FUNDS 2023



## TENNESSEE AQUARIUM USES OF OPERATING FUNDS 2023



Complete audited financial statements are available at [tnaqua.org/about-us/financials-and-annual-report](https://tnaqua.org/about-us/financials-and-annual-report).

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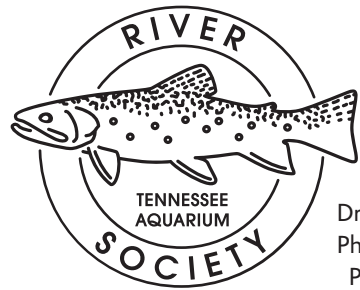
Mata Mata Turtle

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Thank you to the following donors who made gifts to the Tennessee Aquarium in 2023.

- Charles Arant
- State of Tennessee
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**The Aquarium**



Mossy Frog

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**Our Serve & Protect**

**auction raised over \$24,000 to sustain the Aquarium's operations. We thank the following individuals and organizations for donating items to our online fundraiser.**

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A special thanks to our many volunteers who interact daily with our guests. These volunteers help care for the animals, educate, engage guests and are, in most cases, the first staff member a guest encounters during visits.

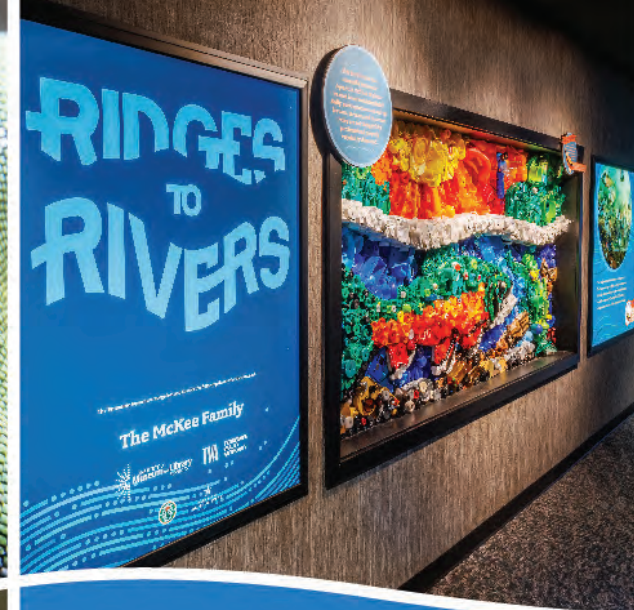


Bearded Dragon



\*Deceased

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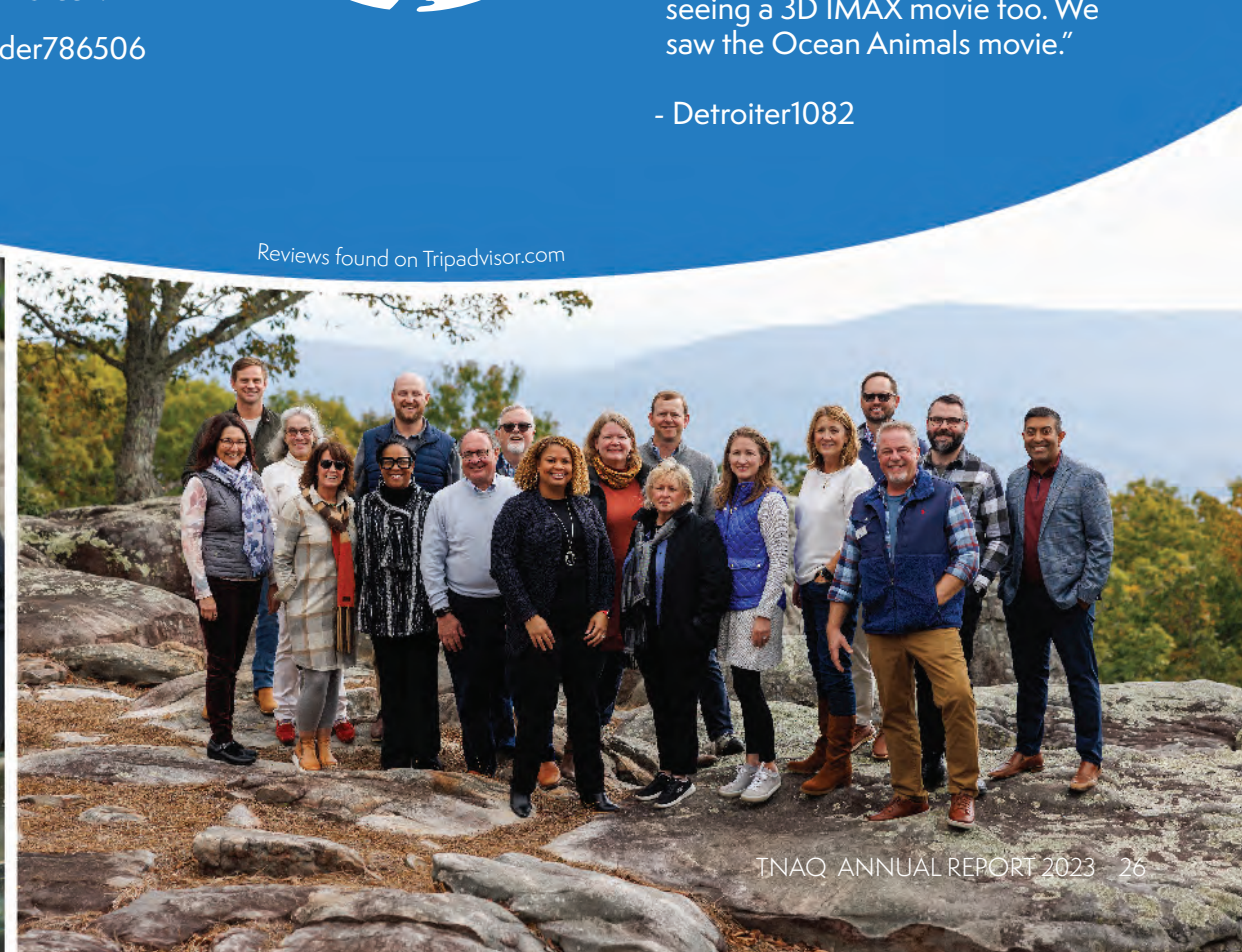
"Great aquarium. Very family friendly. Excellent layout to walk through at our leisure. Plenty of viewing areas. Very informative." - Tom W



"The huge shark and turtles were worth the visit alone. The exhibit is extensive so be prepared to enjoy a long day with a lunch break." - Wander786506

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