

Aquarium-Museum Panel 2007-2008 Annual Report

From: Russell Moll, Panel Chair
To: Chair, Committee on Committees

I am pleased to present this report summarizing the activities of the Aquarium-Museum Panel for the 2007-2008 academic year. In brief, this Panel serves as a source of faculty advice to the Birch Aquarium at Scripps (BAS). This Panel addresses issues pertaining to the operation, intellectual direction and interactions with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography (SIO). The Panel met four times in the 2006-2007 academic year with each meeting lasting one and a half hours.

The topics considered by the Panel in 2007-2008 covered five broad categories – BAS operations, advice on future displays at the BAS, presenting sound science versus science advocacy, plans and ideas for expansion of the BAS and providing better access to the BAS by SIO faculty, staff and students.

Under the category of BAS operations, each Panel meeting began with a discussion of the current status of the BAS by Director Nigella Hillgarth. Her presentations touched on issues such as the financial status of the BAS, near-term and long-term exhibit plans, trends in BAS attendance, and the status of the physical plant of the BAS. The salient message from these discussions was reassurance to the Panel that the BAS is on a good trajectory with stable financial footing and exciting, high-quality exhibits planned for the future.

A substantial amount of discussion at the first two meetings addressed the issue of future displays at the BAS. Topics ranged from a discussion of the deep sea exhibit, revamping the Hall of Fishes to blue sky ideas about future exhibits. There was strong support by the Panel for the deep sea exhibit. The recommendation that the transformation to the Hall of Fishes include a biodiversity theme was highly endorsed by the Panel.

The discussions surrounding sound science versus science advocacy by the Panel was couched in how to present good science and science solutions to contemporary problems without moving into advocacy. This was a continuation of the discussion from June 2007. Once again the Panel offered ideas and examples of what they viewed as unbiased science solutions to problems and highly recommended avoiding advocacy or a specific point of view. Overall the Panel supported the current approach of the BAS

The issue of providing better access to the BAS was the source of continued dialogue by the Panel and several issues were raised under this general category. At each meeting we reviewed the implementation of providing free access to the BAS for SIO graduate students. This popular program has been up and running for more than two years with the net result an increase in graduate student visits to the BAS. The Panel also discussed the program to provide better access by faculty and staff to the BAS. This program, which provides up to four free visits per year for SIO faculty and staff, has been slow to

gain recognition yet is well received by those who become aware of the new BAS access. Improved access by students and faculty/staff has worked toward the desired result of more engagement between the SIO faculty, staff and students and the BAS.

A new topic discussed by the Panel this year is the concept of expansion plans for the BAS. Given the newly opened aquarium at Legoland, there is a sense that the BAS should not delay in expansion plans. As such, Nigella Hillgarth provided an overview of ideas for expansion of the BAS at one meeting and followed by more detailed discussions at the next meeting. She mentioned that an undertaking such as the expansion of the BAS is a substantial endeavor and will benefit greatly from the support of SIO faculty and staff. A wide range of ideas was discussed that included topics such as multiuse space, fund raising and expansion design workshops.

The last Panel meeting of the year concluded with a brief discussion of topics and issues for consideration during the 2008-2009 academic year and a recommendation for a new Panel Chair.