

# Not all is fishy at N.H. seacoast museum

By Jan Shepherd

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RYE, N.H. — New England's shortest coastline belongs to New Hampshire with 18 miles stretching from Seabrook to Portsmouth. Although a summer day at the beach lures most travelers, the Seacoast Science Center here provides a year-round attraction for folks curious about nature and the region's history.

**Detours** Perched on a spectacular bluff in Odiorne Point State Park just south of Portsmouth, the center concentrates on local angles through sea life tanks, interactive exhibits, demonstrations, and indoor and outdoor programs. Small compared with city museums, the center thinks big and focuses on four themes: Gulf of Maine, State's Coastal Connection, Changes to the Sea and Sky, and Working Under the Sea.

"For the most part, we keep and show local species as teaching tools," said Steve Engstrom, staff aquarist, in a telephone interview. "That's what separates us from large aquariums that deal with tropical environments and animals from all over. We showcase what's right out here in our backyard."

That backyard is the impressive Gulf of Maine. The 36,000-square-mile "sea beside a sea" supports at least 652 species of fish, 1,669 species of marine invertebrates, 184 types of birds, 24 kinds of mammals, and more than 400 species of seaweeds.

Among the native species swimming and lounging in Seacoast tanks are lobsters (their claws banded so they don't eat tank-mates), little skate, summer flounder, red anemone, shrimp, hermit crabs, and Longhorn sculpin. A blue lobster has a tank of its own, though Engstrom plans to add species this spring. The Captured in Currents tank displays tropical fish caught in the Gulf of Maine after they rode the warm waters of the Gulf Stream northward.

Native flounder is an example of a species many visitors know only from fish markets. "When they see the bot-

tom-feeding flounder in the tank, they're so surprised at its appearance," Engstrom said. They're even more surprised when he shows them that the fish swim sideways.

In the fall, I watched Engstrom feed chopped squid to individual creatures, as he explained behavior and eating techniques for each one.

Among his diverse duties, Engstrom keeps the popular indoor Tidepool Touch Tank stocked with hermit crabs, mussels, and starfish that visitors can handle.

On the history front, two displays explain the site's background. The center's native rubble stone facility was built in 1920 as a summer home for Portsmouth businessman Robert I. Sugden. In World War II, the US government took control of all properties on the point for coastal defense, then sold it to the state in 1961 for \$91,000. The state then created the 330-acre Odiorne Point park. (The 15-year-old center and the park are separate entities.)

Other exhibits interpret how people work under the sea, from the first rescue of a crew from a sunken submarine in WWII, to EDALHAB, an innovative underwater research lab.

Last December the center introduced two new interactive exhibits, The Seasons of the Sea and Great Bay to the Sea. This summer the \$1 million Interactive Learning Studio opens with a grand celebration June 23. The 1,000-square-foot addition features marine exploration programs in a 30-station high-definition theater setting with high-tech projection and interactive computers.

"It will have programs for all ages and levels of interest," said Karen Provazza, marketing coordinator, in a phone interview. "With the latest technology, we'll show cool sea creatures with the greatest magnification and details. We wanted to knock the socks off people, and we will."

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