



News Release

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SHEDD'S NEW BELUGA ENCOUNTERS LET NATURE DO THE TALKING

Close-Up Connections Offer Once-in-a-Lifetime Educational Experiences

CHICAGO – Ever wonder what a beluga whale heartbeat sounds like or what a whale's skin feels like? Or how Shedd's expert trainers care for beluga whales and other marine mammals? Ever wonder how cold the icy waters of the Oceanarium are? And how you can make a difference in protecting and preserving these amazing animals in the wild? Wonder no more.

Shedd Aquarium today unveiled plans for the Grainger Beluga Encounter Habitat, a new, once-in-a-lifetime educational experience that provides an unforgettable opportunity to have a close-up encounter with a beluga whale. Guests will be awestruck at the experience of being nose-to-nose with these gentle white giants from the northern oceans of the Pacific Northwest and learn firsthand how Shedd's animal experts care for these animals.

"Every day Shedd connects guests with animals to inspire them to make a difference. The new beluga encounter program strengthens that connection in a life-changing manner that we believe will ultimately excite people to get more directly involved in the conservation of belugas at Shedd and in the wild," said Ken Ramirez, senior vice president of animal collections and training. "We are thankful for The Grainger Foundation's continued support of our vital beluga whale program. Their commitment over the last 20 years is one of the main reasons why Shedd's beluga program is successful and the envy of the world. The encounter habitat is one more way we can inspire generations of people to care about our world and act to preserve it."

The educational experience is designed around the animals. After a short orientation session from the animal trainers, guests don a pair of wader boots and join the animal trainers in the water in the new state-of-the-art Grainger Beluga Encounter Habitat, located in a private area overlooking Lake Michigan. With the trainers' guidance, guests can see eye-to-eye with a beluga – and maybe even tickle the animal's tongue, rub its belly or feel its heartbeat.

After this unforgettable experience, guests leave with a photo of their experience, a portrait and short biography of the whale they've met and information about how they can help belugas in the wild. Chicago waterways are connected to the oceans that belugas call home, so our actions here have a direct effect on wild beluga populations.

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“Even in this age of video and the Internet, there is no substitute for looking an animal in the eye, feeling its skin and interacting with it one-on-one,” said Ramirez. “These live encounters make more of an impact on people than a video ever could. Shedd’s beluga encounters offer a safe and fun experience for families while increasing their understanding and appreciation of these magnificent animals and the need to protect them in the wild.”

Guests must be at least 55 inches and children under the age of 16 must be accompanied by an adult to participate in the beluga encounters, which will begin later this summer following the reopening of the Oceanarium. Details about participation to come.

Shedd’s beluga conservation program and messages are critically important now: All five of the wild beluga populations in U.S. waters are listed as depleted under the Endangered Species Act. The status of belugas of the Cook Inlet population off the coast of Alaska has worsened – they were just listed as endangered in October 2008.

About the Oceanarium Renovation

For the first time since its opening in 1991, the popular 3-million-gallon saltwater Oceanarium is undergoing major renovations. All Oceanarium habitats are being recoated, animal habitats are receiving routine maintenance, and the latest technology in animal life-support, heating and cooling systems are being installed. Closer to the reopening date of May 22, the beluga whales, Pacific white-sided dolphins and other animals return to Chicago from their temporary locations at partnering aquariums and zoos accredited by the same organizations that accredit Shedd: the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).

About Shedd Aquarium

Since 1930, the John G. Shedd Aquarium has been connecting the human world to the aquatic world through its majestic and unique animals, award-winning exhibits, leading conservation and research initiatives and world-class educational programming. Caring for more than 32,000 animals, representing nearly 1,600 species from around the world, Shedd Aquarium is the “world’s aquarium.” From its architecturally historic aquarium galleries, to its world-renowned marine mammal pavilion, the Oceanarium, to the colorful and exciting *Wild Reef* exhibit, Shedd Aquarium is one of the preeminent aquariums in the world. Shedd ranks as Chicago’s top-attended cultural attraction and one of the top-attended aquariums in North America – welcoming 2 million guests every year. For more information, visit www.sheddaquarium.org.

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*Shedd Aquarium is supported by the people of Chicago and the State of Illinois.
Shedd Aquarium is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the
Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums.*