

# Seattle and Bergen and their links to the sea

PUBLISHED JULY 13, 2023 · UPDATED JULY 5, 2023

*This article originally ran in the Norwegian American News. It has been reformatted here.*

## Two sister cities expand their aquariums

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Seattle and Bergen, Norway, are sister cities that are major port cities on fjords or sounds, and which have historically been economically dependent on the marine environment. It's no surprise then that both cities have top notch aquariums to educate visitors about the ocean and what lies in and beneath it.



*Photo: Tuomo Lindfors / Creative Commons  
The "shark tunnel" where the visitor is surrounded by corals, fish, and sharks at the Bergen Aquarium.*

Both the Seattle and Bergen aquariums are either planning to or are currently expanding their facilities. The Seattle Aquarium is currently adding an Ocean Pavilion to showcase sharks, rays, and corals from the Indo-Pacific. The Bergen Aquarium in Norway, also known as the National Aquarium, is planning on completely reinventing itself as the World's Ocean Center in another part of the city. The aquarium hopes to have that new facility ready within the next five years.

This article looks at the origins of these two aquariums and their futures, with emphasis on the Bergen Aquarium.

## Seattle and Ted Griffin's orca whales

What then was called the Seattle "Marine" Aquarium opened on Pier 56 on the city waterfront in 1962. Started by entrepreneur Ted Griffin, it exhibited dolphins, sharks, and an octopus named Homer. The sharks, unfortunately, died soon after being put on exhibit. In 1965, Griffin then bought a captured orca whale, named it "Namu," and brought it to a floating pen along the Seattle waterfront. This was the world's first captive orca or killer whale. But Namu died in

captivity within a year because of a bacterial infection, probably from the raw sewage Seattle dumped into Elliott Bay at the time.

The popularity of Namu encouraged Griffin to capture another orca for display, and soon aquariums around the world were asking Griffin to capture an orca for them, too. Indeed, the Seattle Aquarium was home to seven more orcas before it closed just before the newer Seattle Aquarium, funded by the City of Seattle, opened on Pier 59 in 1977.

As explained in the *Seattle Times* of Oct. 30, 2022, the new Seattle Aquarium began by renovating an existing building on Pier 59. The City of Seattle funded its construction and owns the aquarium; it's operated by a nonprofit.

The Seattle Aquarium currently exhibits many marine ecosystems in and around Puget Sound, and has otters and seals, and a popular big rotunda dome in which big fish swim around and over the visitors. Over the years, the aquarium has been renovated and expanded to make the visitor experience more immersive and also to update the technology and habitats of the animals they keep there.

### **The Ocean Pavilion is coming**

The Seattle Aquarium is currently building what will be called the Ocean Pavilion to exhibit sharks, rays, corals, and other animals from the tropical Pacific. It is being funded by public donations and city, county, and port funds. The Ocean Pavilion is just the first of a three-phase renovation and expansion.

Expanding and updating an aquarium involves creative fundraising and getting permits to build, usually in environmentally sensitive areas. And, as with zoos, they're not without controversy. Over the last couple hundred years, our understanding and appreciation for animal life has evolved and how much captivity differs from the wild. Aquariums have been under increasing scrutiny for the treatment of animals and the degree to which these institutions contribute to animal and habitat conservation, as they say they do.

Aquariums also use a large amount of energy to operate, which directly or indirectly contributes to their carbon footprint. More and more, aquariums have the challenge of being strong tourist

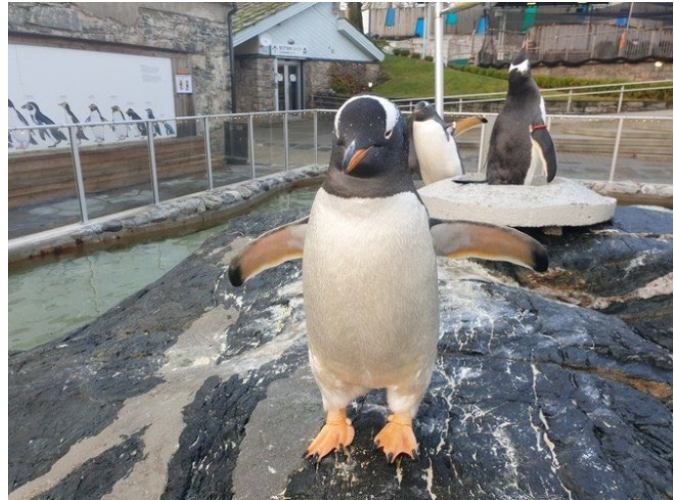


*Photo: Joe Mabel / Wikimedia Commons*  
*The Underwater Dome at the Seattle Aquarium surrounds the visitor with many different kinds of swimming fish.*

attractions (to justify the expense), while also avoiding being called hypocritical if they themselves aren't as sustainable and "green" as they ask their visitors to be when they return home.

## **How the Bergen Aquarium came to be**

The Bergen Aquarium opened in 1960 through funding from the municipality of Bergen, as well as contributions from citizens and businesses. The Aquarium in Bergen came about through the foresight of the Institute of Marine Research, whose main offices are located just north of the aquarium facility. This organization is part of the Norwegian Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs, with a mission to help society to exploit the valuable assets in the sea sustainably. Aquarium CEO Aslak Sverdrup explains that in the late 1950s the institute felt there should be an aquarium close by to showcase the ocean and things that live in it.



*Photo: Bergen Aquarium  
A gentoo penguin in the Bergen outdoor exhibit.*

The Bergen Aquarium has similar types of exhibits as Seattle does, with a kelp forest, seals, and otters. Where Seattle has puffins and shorebirds, Bergen has gentoo penguins. Bergen also has exhibits showing the ecological habitats in and around Norway, as well as coral reefs and fish from Japan. They also have live alligators, amphibians, and insects.

The aquarium was expanded in 1993 and 2018 but still has much of the same tanks and technology from 1960. Perhaps because of its link to the scientific Institute of Marine Research, it collaborates on ocean cleaning projects and especially highlights the damage caused by ocean plastics.

Today, the Bergen Aquarium is a private non-profit foundation that runs almost exclusively on the revenue from ticket sales. They have an agreement with Bergen schools that students can get in free and the schools contribute a nominal amount.

"We think it's our task to give young people education and learning and also not only things that hit the brain but also the heart – so that they can learn more about the ocean and create that empathy and also love for the ocean," says Sverdrup.

## **Human use (and abuse) of the ocean**

Joachim Ekeli, an aquarium "zookeeper," explains the great historical and continued importance of fishing to the Norwegian economy and how overfishing, global warming, ocean plastic, and

other human impacts imperil not only fish but the microscopic animals and plants (plankton) on which fish and larger animals feed in the ocean food chain.

Both Sverdrup and Ekeli are eager to point out that the largest protein source in the world swims in the mesopelagic layer, found 200-1,000 meters (600-3,300 feet) under the ocean surface. The sea life largely composed of “animal plankton” like copepods and krill (both tiny crustaceans) and jellyfish, and small fish, which in turn feeds larger animals.

The Institute of Marine Research has announced its intention to move to the Dokken area of Bergen, and because they share infrastructure with the institute, the Bergen Aquarium needs to move with them. Sverdrup says this is an opportunity to build a bigger facility, update their aging aquarium technology, and provide ways for scientists and industry to showcase their ocean research.

“We need a place where people can ... see the research, a place that can illustrate to visitors, to the people who live here, that we are taking a global role,” says Sverdrup.

A national competition to choose a name for their new facility produced The World Ocean Center (Verdenshav Senteret), or just “O” for short, where O represents, among other things, the “One Ocean” concept. The ocean is global, surrounding every continent, and so human actions in one part of the ocean have global effects. Sverdrup believes the new facility, which will be much more than just an aquarium, will be permitted, funded, and built within the next five years.

“We are going to build something that lasts 100 years, and will be forward looking,” he says.

As part of raising global awareness and understanding of the ocean, the aquarium is involved in the United Nations outreach program for ocean literacy. The grand tall ship of Bergen, the three-masted sailing barque called the *Statsraad Lehmkuhl*, just completed a nearly two-year voyage to conduct scientific research, collect ocean data, sample microplastics, and to educate people about the ocean in its visits to port cities. Both the Seattle Aquarium and the Norwegian National Aquarium are looking forward to expanding to better educate visitors on how they can support efforts for living sustainably with the ocean on a global scale. Along with that, they try to instill the wonder and awe of ocean creatures, fostering an empathic connection to them, and, even though we fish, how to treat them with respect.



*Photo: Eric Stavney  
Zookeeper Joachim Ekeli and author Eric Stavney.*

Both the Seattle and Bergen aquariums offer virtual tours of their facilities online. Search for “virtual tours” or a “field trip” on their websites.

To hear an extended interview with CEO Aslak Sverdrup and go on a short tour by zookeeper Joachim Ekeli, listen to the *nordicontap.com* podcast on The National Aquarium of Norway at [nordicontap.com/the-national-aquarium-of-norway](https://nordicontap.com/the-national-aquarium-of-norway). The Seattle Aquarium’s Ocean Pavilion plans are found at [seattleaquarium.org/ocean-pavilion](https://seattleaquarium.org/ocean-pavilion).

The vision and plan for Bergen’s World Ocean Center is at [o.center](https://o.center).

*This article originally appeared in the July 2023 issue of The Norwegian American. To subscribe, visit **SUBSCRIBE** or call us at (206) 784-4617.*