

A photograph of a young child from behind, looking into a large aquarium tank. The tank is filled with various fish, including a large shark swimming in the foreground. The water is clear and blue.

# Looking Back while Planning Ahead

*A summary of efforts and opportunities to engage the public and advance conservation*

September 2020



As we enter a new decade of expanded collaboration for our blue planet, The Ocean Project team wanted to summarize the successes and lessons learned from our efforts working with our network of partner zoos, aquariums, and museums.

The world around us is currently in a time of crisis, faced with the public health and economic impacts of a pandemic. Additionally, it is quite clear that there is no environmental justice without social justice, and the social justice movement continues to grow rapidly in exciting ways. Much of this report was written pre-Covid, and it also is aimed at the longer term, with a spirit of hope around where we see promising opportunities to grow our collaborations in mobilizing the public to take action for our communities and our blue planet.

These opportunities form the three sections of this report: engaging onsite visitors, empowering youth, and leveraging social media. All of these efforts have been built upon the solid foundation of our market research, summarized [here](#), and these efforts will evolve just as aquariums, zoos, and museums evolve, to be leaders in their communities for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and also to create a sustainable society and a healthy ocean that we all need to survive and thrive.

As I write this letter, it is with full recognition of the tremendous challenges that we face right now and also with sincere hope that soon we will be able to return to a full focus on collaborating with you to create positive outcomes and a better future!

*Bill Mott, Executive Director*

*Thank you!*  
*These partners helped us refine the research findings for impact.*



## EFFECTIVELY ENGAGING VISITORS TO ADVANCE CONSERVATION

The headline finding from our earlier market research was that when visiting an aquarium or zoo people not only expect, but also trust and appreciate conservation information. Over the last five years this finding has been further supported and refined, always with an eye to enhancing visitor experience while maximizing conservation impact.

After completing the survey research summarized in our earlier report, [An Ocean of Opportunities \(2015\)](#), The Ocean Project proposed a new approach, moving from offsite surveying to onsite experiments, beginning with what became the Innovative Solutions Grants+ Program. With support from NOAA, we were able to develop this program and award approximately \$400,000 in grants to nearly two dozen AZA-accredited aquariums and zoos over the course of six years. The “+” was especially important, as recipients not only obtained significant funding, but also the technical assistance and communications coaching that enabled them to put the research findings to the test, the coordination and evaluation to catalyze peer-to-peer sharing and learning, and broad amplification through our global network of partners from all sectors.

Since that time, we have applied this model to other efforts, working with support from other funders such as the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and David and Lucile Packard Foundation-supported Heartwired to Love the Ocean project, and in collaboration with organizations such as Merlin Entertainment and the UN Environment Programme. Reports about each and all of those efforts can be [found on our website](#).



*Our public engagement initiative around fisheries policy has provided the strongest support to date for the power of aquariums and zoos to add value to the conservation movement, while earning accolades from the team that developed “Heartwired to Love the Ocean,” an audience research project supported by the Packard Foundation. The initiative was undertaken in partnership with the Florida, Mystic, New England, Seattle, Texas State, and Virginia Aquariums.*

While those results are undeniably interesting at the individual project level, what stands out to us are the overarching lessons learned. We knew going in that the public’s underlying interest in the ocean can be activated during a visit, and that they would appreciate information about ocean conservation. Yet we also have been able to refine that understanding, and those lessons can be summarized as follows.

- **Use emotional messaging centered on specific species and particular places.** Our earlier research was clear on this point, and our efforts since all have aligned with it. People more easily relate to the plight of animals and places and can be reluctant to believe that the ocean as a whole is in trouble even when that is the unfortunate reality.
- **Recommend actions that individuals can take to help those animals and places.** Results from projects as diverse as those developed by the [Riverbanks Zoo](#) and the [Philadelphia Zoo](#), have suggested that audiences do not always need, let alone want, extensive background on the problems, but rather want to jump to the solutions, and take that first step, motivated by how they can help.
- **Consider youth less as an audience and more as an ally.** As explained in further detail below, we continue to place tremendous importance on engaging younger audiences, especially those in their teens. Innovative efforts undertaken by the [Seattle-based aquarium, zoo and science center working together](#), as well as the [St. Louis Zoo](#) and [Arizona-Sonora Desert](#)

[Museum](#), added new insights, underscoring that the best way to engage youth is in the development of outreach efforts.

- **When promoting individual actions, go above and beyond the basics.** Results from projects developed by the [North Carolina Aquariums](#) as well as a program created in partnership with [UN Environment](#) suggest that visitors are willing and able to go further than we might otherwise expect, whether in choosing clean energy or reducing single-use plastics. In other words, do not underestimate their interest!
- **Also consider actions that are aimed at influencing policy.** Our earlier research had stopped short of exploring the extent to which visitors would be open to this type of ask. Our efforts since then, most notably those around [fisheries policy](#), have shown that visitors are quite open to this type of ask, especially when being asked for their opinions on issues that will be coming up for consideration by policymakers.
- **Measure success at scale.** In what is the largest lesson learned from our efforts from the last few years, we recognize the ongoing importance of ensuring that an ask works at the level of the individual visitor; yet, at the same time, we have been recommending that aquariums, zoos, and museums move to affecting change at scale, whether that is through finding new community partners as was done so well in this project by the [National Aquarium](#), or by adding value to the conservation movement by relaying public opinion to business and political leaders.

Our efforts are ongoing. There is an especially noteworthy project recently completed to engage the public on the issue of marine protected areas, a collaboration with the Aquarium Conservation Partnership and aligned with the findings of “[Heartwired to Love the Ocean](#).” [This effort](#) found that the messaging resonated across the diverse array of visitors, and also underscored the potential to help advance the global movement to protect “30x30,” or 30% of our planet by 2030, which was also the Conservation Action Focus for World Oceans Day 2020.

We remain available to help develop, implement, and evaluate engagement efforts with our partners, noting that this extends beyond what can be done onsite to include what can be done online.

## IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH

As evidenced by ongoing actions on climate change, young people have a unique and largely untapped ability to advance global conservation efforts. As a result, The Ocean Project has been growing our collaboration with aquariums and zoos on youth engagement and leadership development. Our market research has found that those between the ages 13-25 tend to be the most interested and willing to act on the issues, with a high potential to influence others. Yet the research also flagged that all too often this opportunity was overlooked.

As mentioned earlier, The Ocean Project has supported our network of partners to accelerate youth engagement and leadership, including offering a number of grants to explore new ways to engage youth for impact. While the research emphasized the *why*, these projects emphasized the *how*. This work also underscored the importance of approaching youth as an audience that needs engaging. One team led by the [Woodland Park Zoo](#) summed it up when writing, “empowering youth leaders to develop public, and especially peer-to-peer, conservation engagement efforts is highly recommended and can lead to exciting new engagement strategies!”

For the last five years, we’ve been practicing what we preach with the [World Oceans Day Youth Advisory Council](#), a diverse and inclusive group of young people from around our planet, helping to grow the reach and impact of World Oceans Day and ocean conservation year-round. Council members, including many also active with their local aquarium or zoo, are involved throughout the year in countless opportunities to advance youth leadership for conservation. The collaborative advocacy campaign, Sea Youth Rise Up, connects diverse youth from within and beyond our network of aquariums and zoos, providing a platform for young people to express their ideas directly with decision-makers and the media. These two collaborative initiatives are helping form the foundation for an evolving and radically collaborative youth initiative.

Youth engagement and leadership development continues to grow as a top priority of The Ocean Project. Together with our partners we will continue to empower more youth to become conservation champions and scale efforts, by providing many more exciting opportunities to connect directly with policymakers and corporate leaders for conservation impact.

## EXTENDING INTO SOCIAL MEDIA

Our market research had led us to integrate social media into visitor experiences as a way to reinforce messaging and promote action steps. The rapid evolution of digital tools and online marketing is changing the way communities around the world receive information, communicate ideas, and enact change. Social media is proving to be a powerful way for aquariums and zoos to further raise awareness, engage audiences, and advance conservation.



Over the last several years, The Ocean Project's own efforts in social media have centered around World Oceans Day, with notable successes. In 2019, #WorldOceansDay reached 611 million users on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook with 226,000 photo tags on Instagram. In 2020, #WorldOceansDay reached 454 million users across the three platforms and the number of photo tags increased nearly 34% reaching 302,000 tags on Instagram. Followers increased to 158,000 across Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, across which we amplify some of the most innovative and effective engagement efforts from partner aquariums and zoos.

World Oceans Day provides an important rallying point for aquariums and zoos and the larger ocean community, with significant momentum behind the day. This unique event presents an opportunity to reach more mainstream audiences with ocean-positive content, and we expect higher numbers going forward as audiences increasingly turn to digital engagement and virtual action.

The Ocean Project is actively pursuing a proactive digital marketing strategy to help amplify our partners' conservation actions. We are eager to explore together new ways to use social media to help protect and restore our ocean.