

Photo by Amber Van Hoerlende

A DIVING VOLUNTEER'S WORK IN THE VIRGINIA AQUARIUM

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

After my visit to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, I kept wondering about a diver's job in a public aquarium. There is only one thing better than interviewing a diver doing the work, and that is to discover it for yourself. With the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center not far away, I knew what to do next: join their group of volunteer divers.

Volunteers make up a big portion of the workforce of the Aquarium. 212 employees are working next to 800 volunteers. Of these volunteers, 73 are divers. The management of the group is fairly unique within the Public aquarium industry. Staff, including the Aquarium's Dive Safety Officer, ensure the safety and dive operation compliance, as well as determine the responsibilities and duties of the volunteer divers. A core team of volunteer leaders partner with staff to support recruitment, training and scheduling of the volunteers. Together with staff divers, volunteer divers support dive operations in five exhibits. These exhibits hold, over 2.2 million liters of water and are home to over 122 species of fish. The purpose of the volunteer job is to work underwater, not to learn how to dive. Proper certification as a diver and proof of advanced dive experience is required. Proof of physical fitness to participate in dive activities and a criminal check are also a necessity in starting the program.

Divers may be highly certified with many credentials and logged dives, but every potential volunteer diver must pass a skills evaluation. This evaluation allows staff and volunteer trainers to evaluate each diver's

ability to perform basic activities underwater. Nothing special, the normal things all divers should be able to do: swim underwater, hover or obtain neutral buoyancy, losing and retrieving a regulator; removing and replacing fins. This is followed by some not so normal exercises such as getting in and out of the water without splashing, and swimming figures of eight with good body trim and without touching any obstacles. All of these skills, while seemingly simple to perform, are basic necessities for any diver who expects to dive safely and effectively in an exhibit aquarium.

Upon passing the initial evaluation, all divers have to start their training in the Chesapeake Bay Aquarium, one of the Aquarium's exhibits where daily dive programs are performed for guests. Before getting wet, instructors explain the safety and preparation measures to be executed before the start of any exhibit dive operation and the actions to be taken in case of an emergency. It gave me confidence that these procedures are trained and very much stressed throughout my training and with each dive I complete. As divers, we sometimes tend to neglect standard procedures when faced with simple dives. Following good practices keeps us safe.

Besides diver safety, ample time is spent on the safety of the fish and the exhibit. As in all dives, we are just visitors in the fish's home. They have priority, we have to adapt. Whatever we do, we have to keep an eye on the permanent residents of the aquarium. Big or small, their health not only depends on what divers do underwater, but also on the strict adherence

to some rules above the water's surface. Contamination of their habitat must be prevented by proper care and maintenance of our equipment and anything that comes into contact with the aquarium water and their home.

When all the procedures are reviewed and understood, training of the skills needed to be a volunteer diver begins. Every detail of it is explained and must be performed under the supervision of the trainers. After successful completion of the training sessions and the test dives, the real work as a volunteer diver begins. Although the environment is special (i.e. clear visibility, warm water, no current and a lot of curious fish), the work is important and the training ensures the work is done correctly and safely every time.

A DIVE IN A TANK

What is the work involved? Let's discover that while you follow me through a normal 'day' in the tank.

The start of the day depends on how far you have to drive, but it is most probably, like in my case, situated in a garage. Here I pack all my diving gear except tank and weight belt. Everything checked, I load my equipment in the trunk of the car and hit the road.

Around 10:30am, I arrive at the aquarium and check-in. I then go through the 'Staff Only' door and down the corridor towards the aquariums. It still surprises me everytime I go behind the scenes on how much bigger the aquariums look from the public's perception.



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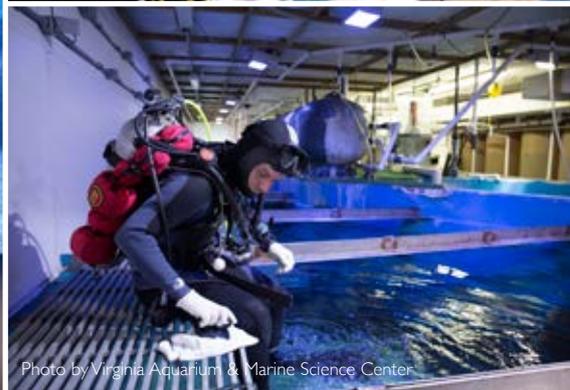


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I know, Snell's law of diffraction, but I find it strange. After a chat with the tender who will be assisting me from the topside during my dive, I prepare my tank, regulator and BCD. After I've gathered my weight belt, I move my equipment to where I'll get in the water first. While tenders won't enter the water for the SCUBA program, they can join the diver later to help with the maintenance duties needed to be completed. In that case, we place their gear near the entry point too.

Following a quick change of clothes, my tender has completed the pre-dive log entries and the educator who I will be working with for the program is already waiting.

Educators are our connection to the public during the SCUBA program. We as divers are the attraction in the aquarium and we cooperate with educators to bring what they are explaining to life.

Just prior to entering the water, the senior aquarist or caregiver of the aquarium gives a short briefing to the tender and myself about what needs to be completed after the program and any information on the animals in the aquarium that can help us during our dive. This informative brief is followed by a review of the dive plan for the day. The start of the dive is signaled by a specialized radio call sent from the tender to the staff monitoring the operation, who will respond in the event of an emergency. The call goes out and with fins, belt, gloves, mask and hood on, I enter the water. Carefully lowering myself into the water from the catwalk, I break the water surface into the exhibit. I check if everything is ok and make sure that my equipment is secure. A few movements to check the buoyancy, I drop to the bottom of the aquarium and turn to the educator on the dry side of the acrylic panel. Communication between divers and educators is non-verbal during the program like in any normal dive. So with the 'OK' sign, I indicate

I'm ready for the demonstration. The educator starts the program with a brief history of Scuba diving and why divers are important in the care of the aquarium's exhibits. With another signal from the educator, my part of the program begins.

The demonstration is a sequence of four simple tasks. The first is to show where the air is coming from that divers breathe by pointing to the regulator, following the air hose to the scuba tank, indicating its location on the back. Task number two is taking the regulator out and clearing the second stage so the public clearly sees air escaping. Hovering in mid water or obtaining neutral buoyancy is task number three followed by the finale of swimming figures of eight.

Sometimes a child visitor is asked to help the educator give the program. So, instead of reacting to the signs of the educator, I respond to those of the child. I can see the thrill in the eyes of the child being able to instruct some strange human fish within the aquarium. Once the demonstration is over, the best part of the job begins. We finish by entertaining the little ones who are totally amazed by our skills and giving the parents the opportunity to take pictures with us through the aquarium's acrylic panels. This is the period where we do 'high fives', shake hands and take pictures with curious and courageous children. Their thankful smiles are enough to turn a bad day great. This moment is always too short.

When the last guest leaves the exhibit, my attention turns to doing the maintenance tasks the aquarist has assigned to my tender and myself. Some of the tasks are cleaning algae from the acrylic windows and scrubbing exhibit decorations such as the pilings, the artificial oyster reef and grasses. Sometimes we need to vacuum the gravel bottom of the aquarium to remove organic debris, like uneaten food and fish feces which collects

there. While we perform our duties, there are flashes from people taking photographs of what we are doing. They find it fun to watch us. I had never had so many people taking a photograph of me while diving until I became a volunteer diver! Having someone watching me while working underwater is a new experience. During my training as an inshore diver, I was always alone in the water. Sometimes with visibility, but always without a public. Interacting with the guests, even while doing my work, is very enjoyable and I always make time to wave and say hello. After thirty minutes of cleaning, our job is done. We return to the surface and leave our aquatic friends behind. One quick turn to look around to see if all is ok before I get out of the water. It's over, but I will return.

The dive is completed, but our work is not yet done. Our equipment needs to be cleaned and dried for its next use. A debriefing is always part of our duties after cleaning up. How did the demo go? Equipment issues? Special observations on the maintenance? Did the fish behave normally? We write our experiences and observations down in the aquarium's dive logbook.

A nice, warm shower concludes the dive operations for the day.

OTHER TANKS

This is the work in only one tank, the Chesapeake Bay Aquarium. The one all divers have to start their volunteer diver career in. Volunteer divers dive for at least 6 months in the Chesapeake Bay Aquarium before applying to dive in other exhibits at the Aquarium. Every aquarium is special and requires new skills to train for; safety measures to understand and new animals to dive with. Before being allowed to work in another tank, you have to go through a new training session for that tank. Isn't diving all about the training? And in this case, also about volunteering.