

Mote-ivated Learning

Sarasota's research aquarium attraction takes a virtual-reality turn



Beneath Mote's Great White Shark exhibit (above right), a visitor interacts with the new SharkTracker exhibit that opened in 2006 (right).

by Chelle Koster Walton

I got promoted all the way to humpback whale this time, top of the food chain. Yes! I may have started out as a lowly dinoflagellate, but I managed to snack my way to the top, while avoiding being shark bait, at Mote Marine Aquarium's latest addition to its always fun way of looking below the surface. The sea's surface, that is.

Immersion Cinema, which opened in 2004, appeals to today's generation of electronic-plugged learners by making a game out of education. Visitors file into the cinema every hour on the half-hour to experience sea life through a combination of forty-foot high-definition big screen and individual touch-screen consoles. The cinema switches off between two experiences. On one, called Dolphin Bay Project, you virtually ride a jet ski, helicopter, or research vessel to help locate a missing dolphin and her calf, all the while warding off predators.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOTE MARINE AQUARIUM; VISITOR PHOTO BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON

The other, *Predator/Prey*, which I was playing, takes you through the food chain by giving you missions to accomplish (find meals, look for deep water, etc.) and warning you to keep an eye out for predators. You tap the screen repeatedly to move your sea creature, hunt, and avoid being hunted. Simultaneously, on the big screen, computer-generated sharks attack prey—but who has time to watch that, I wondered, as I concentrated on surviving as a spiny dogfish shark. You get your choice of which creature you get to be every time you get a promotion. Each player (there aren't consoles for everyone, often families—especially with little ones—play as teams) racks up points, and the top standings are revealed at the end of the twenty-minute show (thirty-five minutes for the Dolphin Bay Project show).

I was proud. I came in number five this time. I had played the game a few months earlier and never made it to the standings at all. I think I died of starva-



Fascination with the undersea world and its inhabitants is an important part of future efforts to protect and conserve marine environments.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOTE MARINE AQUARIUM; TOUCH TANK PHOTO BY MARC ELLIS

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—Dan Bebak

tion as a loggerhead turtle. The shows run throughout the day on a first come basis, and visitors are urged to arrive at least ten minutes before show time.

Admission to Immersion Cinema is included in your ticket to Mote Marine Aquarium, which started out in 1955 as a marine research facility particularly

Mote on the Road

A new Mote traveling exhibit, “Sea Monsters,” recently visited Imaginarium Hands-On Museum in Fort Myers. The interactive exhibit travels the nation and allows kids (of all ages) to play the game show “Sea Monsters—Truth or Tale?” and communicate with Digital Docents at Mote. It examines the giant squid, Mako shark, bioluminescent dragon fish, massive whale shark, and the beautiful but deadly blue-ringed octopus.

fascinated with sharks. It opened to the public with its 135,000-gallon shark tank, a wonder in its day. Other aquaria and tanks displayed more marine creatures, and exhibits gently urged marine conservation.

Mote has grown through the years to include a second visitor center devoted to sea turtles, manatees, and rehabilitat-

ing dolphins and other marine mammals. Hugh and Buffett, permanent manatee residents, are the stars of Goldstein Marine Mammal Visitor Center, which went the extra mile in environmental education. You can watch the pair chowing down on lettuce and hear them sing.

Since then, the main Mote building

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Edgar the turtle peeks
back at visitors

has expanded to include more state-of-the-art exhibits geared toward teaching kids with bright, snappy signs and interactive elements. Sharks continue to be a focus, and although the shark tank, which visitors can view front-on or from-above, still fascinates, the newer Shark Alley Theater and brand-new SharkTracker exhibit, opened in August 2006, engage through multimedia magic.

In the Shark Attack movie, you are the shark. You hear, feel, think, and feed like a shark. Wavy lights simulate your environment, tactile textures under your seat let you feel a shark's skin, scrim curtains add drama to your attack.

SharkTracker, through signage and a touch-screen tracking game, demonstrates how Mote Marine follows the progress of baby sharks. Recent research in Pine Island Sound used the same sort of acoustic system to track bonnethead shark movements in that area. You can watch baby sharks' behaviors in the flesh as they swim around a new special 15,000-gallon tank of their own. It introduces bonnethead sharks to the facility for the first time.

The new exhibit is a model for the direction Mote Aquarium exhibits will be taking, said Dan Bebak, Mote Aquarium vice president. "Our exhibits are becoming more high-tech and interactive to enhance visitor experience, and are more and more focusing on the science of Mote Marine Laboratory," Bebak said. "As one of the leading independent marine research laboratories in the nation, one of Mote's key missions is to communicate the science of the sea to the general public." A white shark exhibit and Deep Sea Diner, family-friendly with a '50s soda-shop look, opened earlier this year.

Around the shark tank, an outdoor plaza has grown to include a ray touch tank and another new wavy touch tank called Contact Cove; an exhibit devoted to rivers, bays, and estuaries; and another about mollusks with a giant squid as a centerpiece, now twenty-five feet long, originally thirty-seven feet long when it was brought up from its New Zealand home two thousand feet below the sea's surface. It is one of only three preserved giant squid on display in the U.S. Signs

here, as throughout Mote, impart information like nibbles of fish food. The giant squid, for instance, wouldn't make it as calamari, one learns: Ammonia in its tissue causes it to taste bitter, according to a sign at its stretch display case.

Go ahead, giggle. Snicker when you hear and read about chocolate chip sea cucumbers and fish with built-in fishing poles (a.k.a. frogfish). Wonder along with the sign "How DOES the puffer go puff?" But beware, as the big-screen introduction to Immersion Cinema warns: "If you're not careful, you might learn something." 🐙

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If You Go

Mote Marine Aquarium
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