

LOOK CLOSER

2003/04 ANNUAL REPORT



**Alaska
SeaLife
Center**

windows to the sea



To our members & supporters:

The years 2003 and 2004 offered further evidence that the Alaska SeaLife Center is an emerging world-class marine research, education, and wildlife rehabilitation facility uniquely focused on understanding and providing expert information on the ecologically and socially important marine ecosystems of Alaska and the North Pacific.

In the research program, new species came on the agenda. Otters, salmon, atka mackerel and Dungeness crabs were added as subjects for research initiatives, next to eiders, Steller sea lions, and harbor seals. Topics from prey selection to pollution were examined as possible sources for declines in species. Continued efforts to examine disease, diet, climate, and other potential sources of decline began to provide clues to the puzzles associated with sea life population losses and failures to recover in recent decades.

Alaska SeaLife Center rescue and rehabilitation efforts meant ocean dependent creatures ranging from eagles to whales were examined, studied, or treated by facility veterinary staff. Many were set free to live longer than they otherwise might have. Others – unable to be released because of unavoidable habituation to humans – contributed to the cause of wildlife appreciation and scientific understanding as charismatic ambassadors for their kind in public aquariums and marine wildlife centers internationally.

As an organization with a mission to enhance public awareness and provide public education, the visitor experience and learning environment also saw significant change in 2003 and 2004 for our nearly 300,000 state, national and international visitors. These visitors enjoyed enhanced emphasis on interpretive and aquarium-based efforts to bring visitors closer, to help them identify with nature, and to connect them with research, rehabilitation and scientific goals at the Center. Related to public awareness, exhibits, and outreach, the education department initiated ground-breaking programs, including distance ocean education programs and innovative science-based courses, camps, and retreats, to reach children and adults in Alaska and beyond.

As we embark on our eighth year, we wish to thank all of you, our supporters, donors and fellow nature enthusiasts, for your continued support and interest in our research, rehabilitation, and education efforts at the Alaska SeaLife Center. The future of Alaskan and North Pacific ecosystems will be influenced by our continued action and targeted efforts to better understand the wonders of nature and the causes of marine ecosystem changes.

You all are essential partners in these efforts.



Photo © Clark James Mishler

Tylan Schrock *Robert Spies*

Tylan Schrock, Executive Director

Robert Spies, Board chair



Photo © Jason Wettstein

The Alaska SeaLife Center: *A unique commitment to understand and provide stewardship for ocean wildlife in Alaska & the North Pacific*

The Alaska SeaLife Center has matured into a world-class research facility committed to understanding and action on critical questions of environmental stewardship. This commitment arises from a core understanding of the intrinsic value of nature and thrives in the context of public concern and interest in marine wildlife in Alaska and in North Pacific waters.

Now is a critical time for scientific research on northern marine species and ecosystems.



Photo © Jason Wettstein

*Nature is just enough: but men and women must
comprehend and accept her suggestions.*

– Antoinette Brown Blackwell

CONSIDER THESE FACTS:

- The western stock of Steller sea lions, a source of inspiration, tradition, and rich biodiversity, has seen dramatic and unexplained declines in the past thirty years, with reports of the beginning of a reversal of declines coming only recently at the September 2004, *Sea Lions of the World* conference.
- After nearly a century of recovery from near extinction caused by the 19th century fur trade, Southwest Alaskan sea otters began to decline again abruptly in 1990, and charismatic harbor and fur seals too have shown dramatic regional declines in the last thirty years.
- Steller's and spectacled eiders – beautiful, captivating, and rare sea ducks – have undergone drastic declines and are listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.
- Each of these species, and an expanded list of socially, economically, and ecologically important creatures such as salmon, Dungeness crabs and atka mackerel, have been under study at the Center in the past two fiscal years.

The Alaska SeaLife Center is proving its relevance by researching and working to rehabilitate essential and keystone species in a fundamental economic, social, and ecological web centered on northern waters.

Photo © Clark James Mishler





Photo © Clark James Mishler



Photo © Jason Wettstein

Research on Steller Sea Lions:

With some 23 projects implemented since 2003, ranging geographically from the west coast of North America to the east coast of Russia, the Steller sea lion program is making strides to understand why Steller sea lion population declines occurred, why Steller sea lions have not recovered, and what information is critical to policy for recovery and prevention of marine mammal declines in the future. Research has proceeded from a conceptual model designed to help ensure that likely factors are considered. Projects include the following efforts, among others:

- The Alaska SeaLife Center is helping to identify foraging grounds, reproduction sites, and other areas critical to the health and well-being of Steller sea lions using satellite linked transmitters, remote cameras, direct observation, and underwater digital video cameras to track sea lion movement, understand nutritional stresses, and examine foraging behaviors and range.
- In 2003, the Alaska SeaLife Center completed construction of a state-of-the-art quarantine facility known as Steller South Beach. The SeaLife Center is currently using the facility to study wild-captured Steller sea lion juveniles in order to better understand the unique nutritional and stress factors on this highly mobile age group with potentially high mortality rates. Steller South Beach allows Alaska SeaLife Center researchers the unprecedented opportunity to study wild-caught subjects for up to three months before releasing them back into the wild, providing an important improvement on information gained from single capture data points of the past.
- The Alaska SeaLife Center is examining food and energy requirements of Steller sea lions at essential points in their lives such as during mating, pupping, and raising their young, in order to unravel the mystery of declines in western Alaska and Russia.
- The Alaska SeaLife Center is using remote monitoring equipment, temporary observation facilities, and limited captures in the North Pacific to examine Steller sea lion behavior and health on rookeries, in the lab, and in the open ocean, comparing areas of relative health to areas of rapid decline in order to provide information on the lives and well-being of Steller sea lions and further clues on ways that sea lions and humans can thrive together.
- The Alaska SeaLife Center has sequenced and characterized genetic cell lines and DNA libraries in Steller sea lions and harbor seals in an attempt to assess potential effects of contaminants on immune functions and provide diagnostic tools for veterinarians.
- The Alaska SeaLife Center is also examining hypotheses ranging from predatory orca behavior, oceanographic changes, changes in the types of fish available, and the presence of chemicals and pollutants as potential factors limiting the welfare of sea lions and other ocean life in the North Pacific.

The Alaska SeaLife Center is using a variety of strategies to discover the factors behind Steller sea lion health, decline, and failure to recover, and thereby aims to provide answers to questions relevant to North Pacific ecosystems.



A head-mounted video camera is tested on a Steller sea lion at the Center
ASLC Staff Photo

Research on Sea Otters:

With the decline of sea otters in southwest Alaska in the past 10 to 15 years, the Alaska SeaLife Center's sea otter program has taken on increasing importance since its inception in 2003. Since 1976, it is estimated that the number of sea otters has declined by 56 to 68 percent throughout southwestern Alaska; upwards of 90 percent in some areas. No one knows for certain why these declines have occurred. The Alaska SeaLife Center is examining the role of numerous factors in explaining this decline and is working to solve this mystery with vital implications for ecology, cultural traditions, and tourism. Research initiatives include the following projects among others:

- In an effort to determine boundaries for the sea otter declines, field researchers have tried to understand why sea otter populations are relatively healthy in Russia's Commander Islands and declining in the Alaskan Aleutian chain and have been working to determine what factors make the difference for healthy populations.

- The Alaska SeaLife Center also has initiated international conferences and planning sessions to examine potential factors from foraging ecology to disease to orca predation, and to develop strategies among a wide network of national and international partners to address regional declines in sea otters.

Sea otters are intrinsically valuable. As a keystone species that is widely loved for unique charisma and patterns of care for their young, sea otters have been a part of Russian, Canadian, west coast, and Alaskan tradition and livelihoods for thousands of years. Today, the Alaska SeaLife Center is working to understand sea otters better in order to ensure that healthy populations remain for future generations to enjoy.

Research on Fur Seals:

In late 2004, the Alaska SeaLife Center, recognized for groundbreaking work in marine mammal research, was invited to initiate a new program to examine fur seal declines in far western Alaska. The Alaska SeaLife Center looks forward to working with federal agencies, industry, and local communities to manage this

important resource. Continued research on fur seals will help build a more complete picture of ecosystem factors and effects on North Pacific and Bering Sea wildlife. With more knowledge, policies on ocean mammals will proceed from an ever more informed scientific basis.

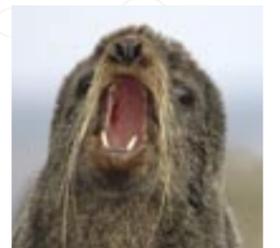


Photo © Russ Andrews



Photo © Jason Wettstein

Research on Harbor Seals:

Harbor seals also have experienced widespread population declines since the 1970s in some areas of Alaska. At Tugidak Island near Kodiak, numbers have declined by nearly 85 percent, from approximately 9,300 seals to some 1,000 by 1990. Areas such as Prince William Sound have experienced roughly a 63 percent decline since 1983. Alternatively, since the mid-1990s, the Kodiak area is showing signs of recovery. The reasons for declines and recovery are unknown, but scientists at the Alaska SeaLife Center are working to find root causes. Numerous factors are under investigation at the Alaska SeaLife Center via the following projects among others:

- The Alaska SeaLife Center is using remote cameras and active observation to monitor harbor seals in Aialik Bay, where seal numbers diminished by nearly 80 percent between 1979 and 1989. While populations have stabilized since 1989, the SeaLife Center is tracking ice movements, weather, tides, and human visitation to help determine the factors that led to the reductions in harbor seals in past decades.
- While nearby Aialik Bay provides a local natural laboratory, Alaska SeaLife Center research extends far beyond local impact. Ongoing studies at the Alaska SeaLife Center in 2003 and 2004 included work on understanding genetic stock and how high and low fat diets affect harbor seals. A change in prey availability from



Photo © Jason Wettstein

high fat to low fat fish is proposed as a leading hypothesis in explaining seal declines. This prey abundance change is linked to ecological warming in Alaskan waters first noted in winter of 1976-77, a trend that may have occurred periodically in the past.

- Four of the resident harbor seals at the Alaska SeaLife Center are providing valuable information on the potential impacts of low dietary lipids. The seals participated in quarterly feed assimilation trials to determine the digestibility of high and low fat fish. Total body fat, blubber thickness, bone growth and blood chemistries were monitored twice per month to assess the health and condition of animals.
- The Alaska SeaLife Center also initiated a unique partnership with Alaska Natives and the Alaska Native Harbor Seal Commission to tap traditional knowledge and work with subsistence hunters who provide biosamples from seals. These samples are used to determine the effects of chemical contamination on harbor seal health and perhaps ultimately warn of dangers to human health.

With better understanding of the human and ecological factors that impact harbor seals, the Alaska SeaLife Center intends to gain insights into the conditions causing seal declines and other population fluctuations.



Photo © Clark James Mishler

Research on Fish & Invertebrates:

The Alaska SeaLife Center is focused on continual learning, both in its formal research programs and in its public education and husbandry endeavors. While many consider the Alaska SeaLife Center's mammals and sea birds among the most charismatic of research subjects, the working philosophy of the SeaLife Center recognizes the importance, beauty, economic, ecological, and scientific importance of all species in our regional waters.

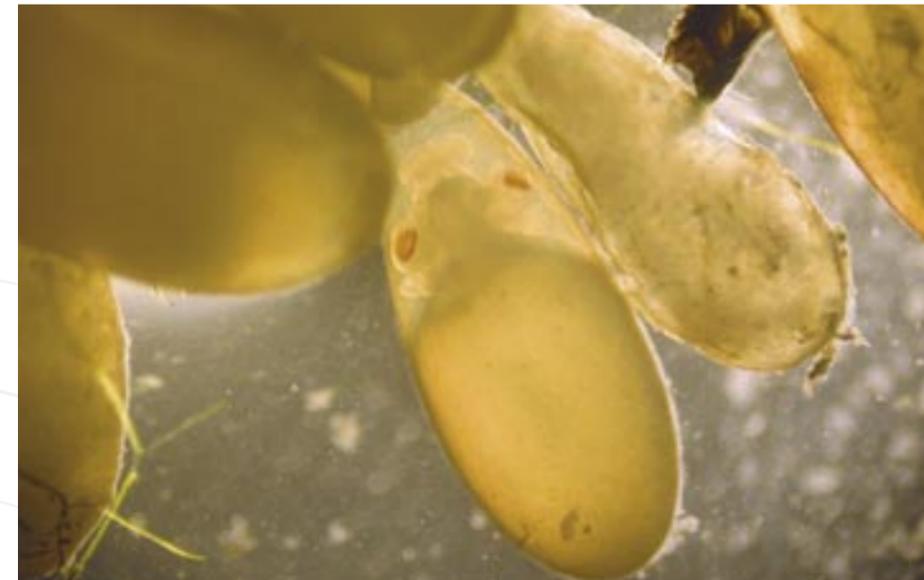
The SeaLife Center is working on species with high economic, ecological, and social importance to Alaska including among others: chinook and coho salmon, Dungeness crab, and atka mackerel.

Of particular note is a private-public partnership with the Maine-based corporation MariCal.™ The project will enhance salmon numbers and examine salmon lifecycles as well as provide a public service to the Alaska SeaLife Center's regional communities.

By better understanding the life processes and reproductive habits of fish and invertebrates, the Alaska SeaLife Center hopes to increase multiple-use, recreational and economic opportunities in its backyard and become a regional science center focused on improving natural resource management and enhancement for the benefit of current and future generations.



Photo © Jason Wettstein



Octopus eggs Photo © Ed DeCastro



Photo © Clark James Mishler



Photo © Chris Wettstein

Research on Eiders & Other Marine Birds:

The Alaska SeaLife Center has been active in eider research since 2001. With eight projects covering topics ranging from foraging ecology and captive programs to reproduction and disease, the Alaska SeaLife Center has become increasingly involved in research efforts relevant to the conservation of eiders in Alaska. The Alaska SeaLife Center eider program also provides a knowledge center working to understand wildlife through research and holds the potential to provide options for captive-to-wild programs in the future. Since the 1990s, Steller's and spectacled eiders have been listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Recent estimates put Steller's eider numbers at only 220,000 birds worldwide – down by as much as 50 percent over the last 30 years. While eiders were the focus for the Alaska SeaLife Center marine bird research in 2003 and 2004, the Center has also been active in researching and monitoring other birds including Pacific common eiders, common murres, puffins, and pigeon guillemots in Prince William Sound. Projects in 2003 and 2004 examined various factors that could be causing local, regional, and even global declines in marine bird populations. These, among other research projects, are representative of Alaska SeaLife Center research on seabirds:

- Through field research and onsite laboratory work – including maintenance of the only known permanent spectacled and Steller's eider flocks in the world housed for both breeding and research – the Alaska SeaLife Center is examining breeding patterns and conditions, stress and reproductive hormones, nutrition, and disease in eider populations in order to gain more

information on the factors behind eider declines and threats to recovery.

- The Alaska SeaLife Center also applied a sophisticated laparoscopy technique to collect liver samples. Laparoscopy, a form of liver surgery using minor incisions, is an attempt to find the least invasive methods to gain scientific knowledge and demonstrates the technical sophistication of the Alaska SeaLife Center and the groundbreaking techniques our researchers are developing to meet scientific objectives.
- Initiating the only known attempt to breed captive Steller's eiders in Alaska, the Alaska SeaLife Center is investigating the breeding needs of the ocean-diving ducks to better understand their decline and aid in their recovery. This effort has seen initial indications of progress despite the difficult task of breeding the birds in captivity. While this important work is likely to present challenges over years, research continues to increase knowledge about the birds and their unique requirements.

The North Pacific's marine bird population is susceptible to a variety of challenges ranging from pollution to invasive species to global warming. Marine birds provide a marine ecosystem indicator for measuring near-term changes. The Alaska SeaLife Center is working to stand at the forefront of efforts to understand beautiful arctic and sub-arctic birds and to ensure their continued survival as well as maintain biodiversity for the richness of the planet and for future generations of avian enthusiasts around the world.



ASLC Staff Photo

For more information visit www.alaskasealife.org/site/research

Rescue Networks & Rehabilitation:

Contributing to Science & Helping Animals in Crisis

The Alaska SeaLife Center is the only permanent stranding facility for marine mammals in Alaska, and the years 2003 and 2004 clearly demonstrated the need for the facility.

Since its inception, the Alaska SeaLife Center has treated or examined more than 50 harbor, bearded and ringed seals, more than 400 marine birds, two walruses, more than a dozen sea otters, eagles and other birds of prey, a northern fur seal, an elephant seal, a Steller sea lion, and even a few prowfish.

Part of an Alaskan stranded marine animal network, the Center rescues, treats, and, if possible, releases stranded animals in Alaska, making reasonable efforts to rehabilitate and release as many rescued animals as possible. Sometimes injuries or habituation to humans require that animals are maintained in captivity as ambassadors for their species, but a major goal of the program is to return healthy, rehabilitated animals back to their natural habitat.

The rescue and rehabilitation program also assists with monitoring the status of wild populations through scientific study of injured, sick, orphaned, and dead marine mammals and birds. The Alaska SeaLife Center is a recognized center of veterinary research, providing stranded animal rescue workshops in Juneau, Cordova, Homer, and other locations in 2003 and 2004. The Rescue and Rehabilitation department also performs a public service role, alerting the public of proper and legal

procedures when encountering a sick or stranded sea animal and standing ready to assist and advise in the event of oil spill accidents that could harm Alaska's unique wildlife.

While there is merit in helping individual animals, the impact of the rescue and rehabilitation program goes beyond this narrow focus to provide solid, longer-term benefits to species as well. Operating as a designated marine mammal stranding center within a marine research facility allows veterinarians and staff to learn about animals during the rehabilitation process and advise researchers on animal physiology and epidemiology. Rescued and rehabilitated animals and even recovered carcasses serve to augment research projects such as testing satellite tracking equipment, disease tracking, and dietary studies. Necropsies of dead animals, including necropsies of seabirds and whales performed at the Center, provide data on environmental factors affecting species survival. Information gained adds to the pool of knowledge necessary to conserve species.

In essence, the Alaska SeaLife Center's rehabilitation program provides a clearinghouse for veterinary, rehabilitation, and husbandry knowledge. The rehabilitation program advises both the Alaska SeaLife Center staff and partners on innovative techniques to enhance aquatic animal medicine, knowledge of disease processes, diagnostics, treatment, husbandry, and nutrition. Veterinary and husbandry collaborations with researchers and partners across the United States ensure an advanced ability to collect data from animals in the most humane way possible.

Compassion is the basis for morality

– Arnold Shopenhauer



ASLC Staff Photo

For more information visit www.alaskasealife.org/site/rehabilitation



Photo © Clark James Mishler

Aquarium Interpretation, Education & Outreach:

Building Responsive Relationships with Our World

In all things in nature there is something of the marvelous.

– Aristotle

With over 950,000 national and international visitors since its opening in 1998, the Alaska SeaLife Center is winning the world's attention and providing a forum for discussing and learning about the North Pacific's fascinating ocean wildlife.

Alaskan and North Pacific Wildlife as Ambassadors for Nature

From the mysterious to the marvelous, the Alaska SeaLife Center provides a unique window to ocean wildlife in Alaska. The Alaska SeaLife Center offers interpretative services designed to educate and involve, as well as facilities and programming that provide hands on and interactive experiences. The past two years saw a dramatic increase in the number of daily interpretive programs. Unique presentations are now delivered by trained staff members nearly every hour. The Center's partnership with the National Park Service also expanded to include three daily presentations at the Center and cross-training of staff. During 2004, the Alaska SeaLife Center aquarium staff successfully bred a captive pair of Giant Pacific Octopuses. The result at the close of 2004 was viable eggs (see photo page 7), an uncommon accomplishment among aquarium programs, and an accomplishment that is expanding knowledge and the public appeal of this intelligent yet reclusive species.

While not formally part of the research program,

aquarium staff take their vocation seriously and practice sound science to advance learning while monitoring and caring for animals.

In addition to seabirds and marine mammals, at the end of 2004, the Alaska SeaLife Center public exhibits featured some 2,400 marine fish and invertebrates native to Alaska and the North Pacific. In 2004, the aquarium underwent impressive changes with a new jellyfish exhibit and a major renovation to provide interactive opportunities within the bird exhibit – efforts that mirror the growth and maturity of the Center as a whole. A unique collection designed to educate and excite the imaginations of ocean lovers around the world, the aquarium aspect of the Center builds the case for understanding, respecting, and living in greater harmony with our natural world.

Through person-to-person interpretation, specialized tours and public awareness building efforts, the Alaska SeaLife Center has generated attention on every continent in the world with hundreds of thousands of visitors and hundreds of news outlets conveying its research, rehabilitation and education mission to people around Alaska, around the nation, and around the world.



Photo © Clark James Mishler

Education and Outreach to Provide Public Tools for Ocean Appreciation

Complementary to these public awareness and interpretation efforts, the Alaska SeaLife Center's education program and GCI™, an Alaska-based telecommunications company, have expanded into distance education in 2004 with attention on leveraging public-private partnerships, as well as creating programming to educate marine wildlife enthusiasts. In 2003 and 2004, the Alaska SeaLife Center hosted thousands of K-12 students for self-guided tours, day programs, and overnight "Nocturnes," as well as dozens of elderhostel groups. Lectures and tours at the Alaska SeaLife Center, provide significant opportunities for ocean education and awareness building among students both young and young at heart. For those who could not make it to the edge of Resurrection Bay, outreach specialists conducted programs reaching more than 25,000 students in Anchorage, around the country, and in remote locations and villages throughout Alaska, such as Kotzebue, Nome, St. Paul in the Pribilofs, and Alutiiq villages such as Nanwalek and Port Graham. Additionally, the Alaska SeaLife Center proved itself a hub for professional development. In partnership with Kenai Fjords National Park, the Center hosted more than 100 teachers for workshops, training and development since 2003, as well as workshops for professional biologists, veterinarians, teachers, cultural and wildlife interpreters, and wildlife managers through partnerships with the Oceans Alaska Science and Learning Center; Kenai Fjords National Park, and the North Pacific Marine Research Institute.

These education and public outreach efforts provide the essential element of social context to the research and rehabilitation activities of the Center by transparently and persuasively indicating the importance of research and by reaching out to build innovative, expanding connections to the global public.



Photo © Clark James Mishler

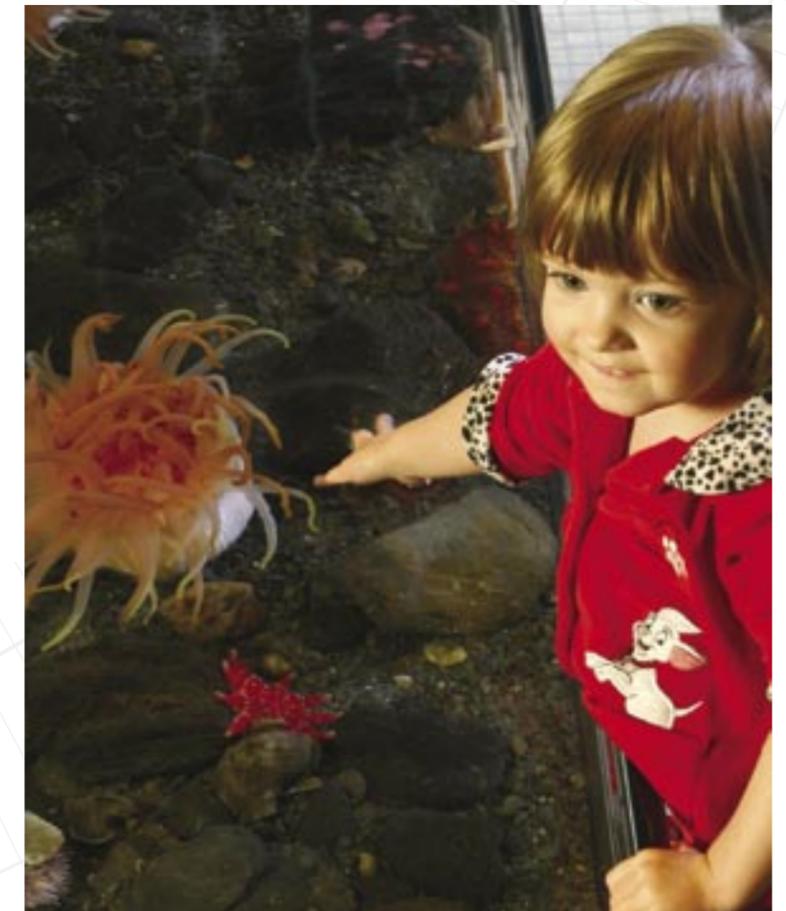


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For more information visit
www.alaskasealife.org/site/visitors
 & www.alaskasealife.org/site/education

Responsible finance for a continuous future of public good

Financially, the Alaska SeaLife Center benefited from a period of stability and health during 2003 and 2004. In tandem with a strong mission, the Alaska SeaLife Center has established a record of stable financial best practice. While not all financial aspirations have been met, the Center ended fiscal year 2004 by achieving critical fiscal goals. As reported to the board of directors in their annual audit report, the Alaska SeaLife Center is considered by its auditors to be “low risk” in regard to its financial situation and in regard to current or potential future creditors – essentially a clean bill of financial health.



Photo © Chris Wettstein

Alaska SeaLife Center Financial Highlights

	2003 <i>(actual)</i>	2004 <i>(actual - 9 months)</i>	2005 <i>(budget)</i>
REVENUE			
Direct Grant Revenues	8,301,961	6,648,447	8,900,872
Visitor Services Revenues	1,854,618	1,970,677	2,203,047
Cost Recovery from Grants	3,090,408	2,696,111	3,743,221
Educational Program Revenues	133,033	115,939	171,916
Donations	277,076	286,123	257,098
Interest	44,930	20,465	12,000
Total Revenue	13,702,026	11,737,762	15,288,154
EXPENSES			
Science Program	6,404,135	5,348,556	6,920,500
Rehabilitation Programs	506,792	493,090	725,497
Education Programs	555,936	214,572	518,889
Total Program Expenses	7,466,863	6,056,218	8,164,886
Facilities Costs, incl Depreciation	3,277,770	2,650,797	3,838,777
Administration, incl Vet Services	1,215,793	1,103,740	1,338,615
Husbandry	510,540	867,712	1,363,139
Visitor Services Operations	1,224,077	959,747	1,344,149
Total Expenses	13,695,043	11,638,214	16,049,566
Net Income	6,983	99,548	(761,412)
Less: Depreciation	(1,841,023)	(1,052,494)	(1,320,000)
Adjusted Net Income	1,848,006	1,152,042	558,588
Less FUNDED Fixed Asset Purchases	(1,233,125)	(463,249)	(340,870)
Cash Flow from Operations	614,881	688,793	217,718*

* The 2005 operating budget includes substantial investments in facilities, education, information services, and visitor services.

Other financial news at the end of 2004 included the following:

- Visitor revenue was up 12.8 percent over the same period in 2003; Research programs remain healthy and on track.
- The 2005 budget was approved at \$16 million, which includes some \$750,000 in internal investments in areas such as facilities maintenance, the education department, the visitor services department, technology, development, and personnel.
- Expansion included purchase of additional space, including a building adjacent to the Alaska SeaLife Center. This purchase creates more opportunities to increase critical office space, and advance and carry out the Alaska SeaLife Center’s mission.
- The Alaska SeaLife Center changed its fiscal year from January to December to October to September in order to better match the seasonal cash flow of the organization, resulting in a nine-month fiscal year for 2004.

Alaska SeaLife Center Members & Donors 2003/2004

Major donors in 2003-2004:*

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Rasmuson Foundation

CORPORATIONS

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Conoco Phillips
British Petroleum
Wells Fargo
Shoreside Petroleum/Essential One
Totem Ocean Express
Alaska Heritage Tours

INDIVIDUALS

Barbara Weinig
Tom Tougas

*Among other individuals, governmental, and philanthropic organizations.

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Carol Wood

A Special Thanks:

In addition to those members listed, the Alaska SeaLife Center would like to thank our 2003 and 2004 membership, including our 320 couple membership holders, our 353 family membership holders, and our 439 individual membership holders.

We would also like to thank the contributors, donors, volunteers, collaborators, and supporters that have helped us work toward our mission of understanding and maintaining the integrity of the marine ecosystem of Alaska through research, rehabilitation and public education.

Your support is invaluable to the success of our efforts.



The Alaska SeaLife Center is dedicated to understanding and maintaining the integrity of the marine ecosystem of Alaska through research, rehabilitation and public education.



**Alaska
SeaLife
Center**

windows to the sea

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Research on animals is conducted under the authority of the Marine Mammal Protection Act
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