



GEORGIA AQUARIUM

SEA  
*change*

2016 ANNUAL REPORT



Dear Friends,



2016 was a year marked by major milestones for Georgia Aquarium. Last year, we wrapped up our year-long 10th anniversary celebration, became one of the first five organizations to become Certified Humane by the American Humane Association (AHA), and gave a forever home to six (now seven!) rescued sea lions in our newest gallery, SunTrust Pier 225. Through all this, we continued our commitment to educating future generations, advancing the knowledge of the underwater world, and supporting members of our military and their families. None of this could have been accomplished without your incredible support and ongoing dedication to Georgia Aquarium.

Georgia Aquarium’s educational programs continue to inspire future generations to preserve our planet for years to come. In 2016, our Sponsored Education Admissions (SEA) Program made it possible for 52,984 students from Title I schools to visit the Aquarium and learn about the ocean, all free of charge. In May, we welcomed the one millionth student educated at the Aquarium since opening in 2005, and celebrated the occasion by announcing the launch of our new STEAM Forward series – ten video lessons created in partnership with Georgia-Pacific, designed to give middle school students a glimpse at real world careers.

Georgia Aquarium continues as a global leader in the research and conservation of aquatic animals, sending teams around the world to study many species in their natural habitats. We marked our eleventh year of whale shark research with expeditions to study these gentle giants in the Galapagos Islands and the remote Island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic. In 2016, Georgia

Aquarium also sent researchers to study manta ray migrations along the northeastern Florida coastline for the fifth year in a row. Other research and conservation initiatives involved coral reefs, sand tiger sharks, penguins and sea lions.

*This year, we continued our commitment to educating future generations, advancing the knowledge of the underwater world, and supporting members of our military and their families.*

Georgia Aquarium is proud to support the brave men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces. Since 2008, our Veterans Immersion Program (VIP) has assisted in the rehabilitation of more than 2,200 veterans and active duty military. Participants have the opportunity to swim or dive in our 6.3-million-gallon Ocean Voyager Built by The Home Depot gallery, where they can relax in the calming environment and experience up close magnificent whale sharks, majestic manta rays, and many other species. Georgia Aquarium is honored to serve these military heroes by providing them with this amazing experience.

I am constantly inspired by our supporters, who make all of this possible. These accomplishments and so many more are achieved through your incredible generosity and tremendous dedication. With your continued commitment to Georgia Aquarium, there will undoubtedly be many more milestones ahead. I look forward to celebrating them together.

Thank you for helping us make a difference.

Michael A. Leven  
Chairman and CEO, Georgia Aquarium

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*Georgia Aquarium marked its eleventh year of whale shark research in 2016 with two return expeditions to study these elusive giants in their natural habitat – in the incredibly biodiverse Galapagos Islands and the remote island of St. Helena.*

*Research in the*  
**Galapagos Islands**

In 2016, Georgia Aquarium researchers returned to the Galapagos Islands – the only known location where large, female whale sharks that appear to be pregnant can be seen gathering.

One of the objectives for the expedition was to collect blood from the sharks to confirm that they are indeed pregnant, possibly on their way to pupping grounds. The second goal of the expedition was to learn more about the southern sunfish (*Mola ramsayi*), a large, pelagic species found in the Galapagos.

Unfortunately, in a very uncharacteristic turn of events, there were almost no whale sharks to be found this year. The sunfish portion of the project, however, was an enormous success. A total of 21 tags were deployed, skin samples were collected from eight different animals and four acoustic receivers were deployed around the island to track where the sunfish are going.

Even though the whale shark portion of the trip did not go as they had hoped, the team was very happy with what they were able to accomplish. Georgia Aquarium’s research team participated in what may very well be the largest study to date on the southern sunfish, and they are prepared to try again, the next time the opportunity to draw blood on free swimming whale sharks presents itself.

# Global Reach

*Return to*  
**St. Helena** Georgia Aquarium’s research team kicked off 2016 by travelling more than 6,000 miles to research whale sharks and their behavior off the coast of remote St. Helena Island in the South Atlantic. This is the Aquarium’s second journey to St. Helena in as many years.

St. Helena may play a vital role as a mating ground for whale sharks. Mating behaviors of whale sharks have never been documented. In 2016, researchers set out to study these mysterious sharks, how they use the island, and where they go when they leave.

The team used a variety of research techniques, including computer-aided photographic identification, laser calipers to measure size, and several different types of tracking tags to help determine where whale sharks go. They also worked with locals to install an acoustic array, a network of underwater hydrophones around the island that listen for tags put on whale sharks and other species. During their time in St. Helena the team tagged over 30 whale sharks and photographed dozens more to help further our knowledge of this elusive species.

# Manta Rays

## *Five Years of Continued Research*

In 2016, Georgia Aquarium's Research and Conservation team made its fifth expedition to study the seasonal manta ray migration found along the northeastern Florida coastline. Every spring, hundreds of manta rays converge on the waters around St. Augustine, where they spend about two months before moving on. In 2011, Aquarium researchers began studying this population by conducting aerial surveys to understand just how many of these rays were part of the aggregation.

When it became apparent that there was a robust seasonal migration occurring, Aquarium researchers started affixing satellite tags to these large rays in order to learn more about the rays' migratory patterns as well as conducting plankton tows with the hopes of identifying their main food source, since it appears the mantas are spending at least some of their time feeding.

In 2016, the research team undertook a two-week expedition, where they collected eight tissue samples, deployed seven satellite tags and collected samples from four plankton tows. Georgia Aquarium is committed to studying this population further in years to come.



In November 2016, Georgia Aquarium expanded its conservation efforts by announcing the opening of a new facility for breeding and studying sand tiger sharks at Marineland Dolphin Adventure.

Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium and Ripley's Aquariums are partners in this new program, along with the South-East Zoo Alliance for Reproduction and Conservation (SEZARC).

The new facility utilizes a variety of natural features to provide sand tiger sharks with an environment conducive to breeding activity, including exposure to daylight and seasonal water temperature changes.

The ongoing study of the reproductive cycle of sand tiger sharks will help scientists better understand how they reproduce and collect biological samples for further testing. This species experienced population decline due to more than 40 years of overfishing and entanglement in commercial fishing gear. Working alongside partner institutions, Georgia Aquarium and Marineland teams will not only provide natural breeding opportunities for sand tigers, but also collect samples of sperm from the animals in their care for cryopreservation. Hopefully, these samples will eventually be used for artificial insemination in aquariums worldwide. Through continued research, we can take appropriate steps to help our ocean and shark populations across the globe.

New facility for breeding and studying Sand Tiger Sharks opens at Marineland Dolphin Adventure.



# Coral

Georgia Aquarium is committed to the conservation of corals around the world. Our team has dedicated thousands of field and laboratory hours to help give corals a chance, not only to survive, but to thrive in a challenging, changing environment.

Since 2010, Georgia Aquarium has partnered with the Coral Restoration Foundation to grow coral fragments in an underwater nursery near Molasses Reef in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. These fragments are then transplanted to Molasses Reef and other affected reefs to restore coral populations.

In 2011, Georgia Aquarium became involved in the SECORE Foundation (SEXual CORal REproduction), a non-profit initiative of public aquariums and coral scientists. This group harnesses the power of the coral's own spawning behavior to supplement natural populations with laboratory-reared baby corals.

In August 2016, Georgia Aquarium researchers, along with other conservation focused organizations, assisted the Coral Restoration Foundation with staghorn coral spawn collection in Key Largo, Florida. Researchers and scientists dived to gather thousands of staghorn gametes to conduct further research on this endangered species and help replenish the depleting coral populations.

It was the first-ever trip where coral gametes of this endangered species were brought back to the Aquarium. This is an astounding milestone for Georgia Aquarium to partake in this extremely delicate process of growing coral in a controlled environment.

Georgia Aquarium's coral restoration efforts have been made possible through the generous support of The UPS Foundation, which has funded this project continuously since 2012. Their financial support, along with Georgia Aquarium's scientific expertise, will help researchers find a way to help coral populations thrive in their changing environment.

## Restoration and Spawning

*Researchers and scientists dived to gather thousands of staghorn gametes to further research on this endangered species and help replenish the depleting coral populations.*

# Research and Conservation at Home and Abroad

## Beluga Whales

Georgia Aquarium has been a financial supporter and active participant in beluga whale stranding efforts in Alaska, and collaborative studies of beluga whales in Bristol Bay, Alaska, to assess their health, physiology, and foraging behavior. In addition, the Aquarium supported the development of the Cook Inlet Beluga Recovery Plan, and is now helping with research identified in the plan as important to the recovery of the endangered Cook Inlet beluga whale population.



## Learn more

about our research and conservation efforts at [GeorgiaAquarium.org/SupportConservation](http://GeorgiaAquarium.org/SupportConservation)



## Dolphins

Georgia Aquarium continued its ongoing work with the Bottlenose Dolphin Health and Environmental Risk Assessment project (HERA). The project has documented zoonotic diseases, contaminant issues and other factors that have important implications to dolphin and human health.

## Manatees

In early May, a team from Georgia Aquarium participated for the second time in the health assessment and satellite tagging of Georgia's manatees. Photo: Sea to Shore Alliance under USFWS Permit MA37808A-0



## Sea Turtles

After nine years of rehabilitation, T.J. the loggerhead sea turtle was released off Jekyll Island, Georgia in September.



## Penguins

Animal Care Staff from Georgia Aquarium traveled to Cape Town, South Africa to assist the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB) with rescue, rehabilitation, and release of seabirds during a peak stranding season.



## Hurricane Matthew

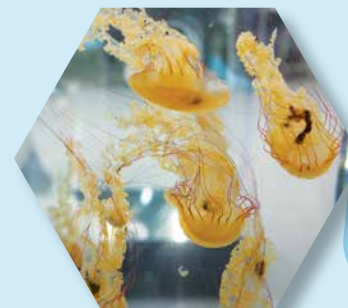
During Hurricane Matthew, a team of 20 staff members from Georgia Aquarium and Marineland Dolphin Adventure sheltered on-site to provide around-the-clock care to our animals at MDA.

Georgia Aquarium offered a temporary home and uninterrupted care to rescued sea turtles from Jekyll Island's Georgia Sea Turtle Center after Hurricane Matthew forced their staff to evacuate.



## Jelly Lab

Aquarists in Georgia Aquarium's jelly culture lab utilized sustainable aquaculture methods to grow several species of jellies from stationary polyps to free-swimming adults. Many of these jellies may be viewed in our Tropical Diver gallery.



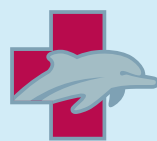
## Atlanta Field Work

Georgia Aquarium has partnered with South Fork Conservancy to study water quality and fish populations in the South Fork of Peachtree Creek in Atlanta, Georgia.



## Scientific Publications

Since 2006 our Research and Conservation program has collaborated with more than 15 universities as well as multiple state and federal government agencies resulting in over 120 scientific publications.



GEORGIA AQUARIUM  
CONSERVATION  
FIELD STATION

## Conservation Field Station

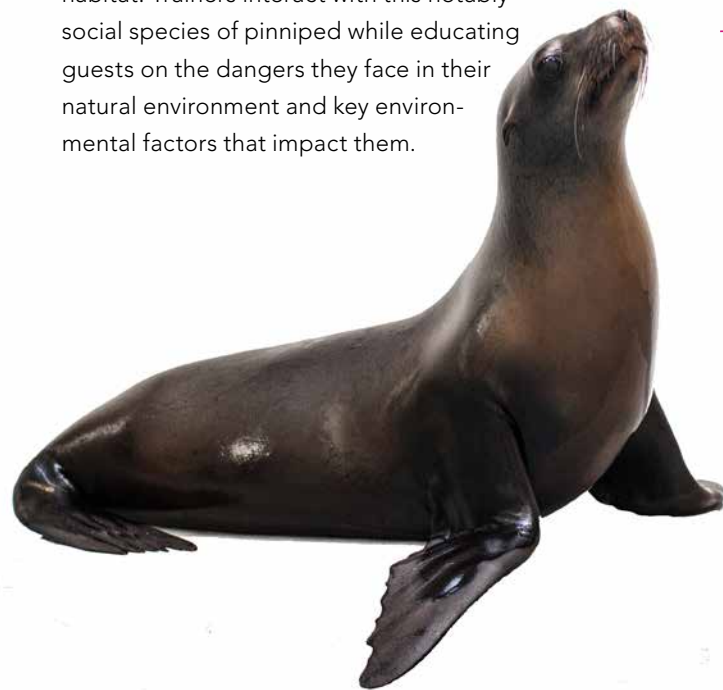
Georgia Aquarium Conservation Field Station's Conservation Outreach Initiative (CORI) completed its 7th consecutive year of educational outreach. With help from a group of outstanding volunteers, every 2nd and 5th grader in the Flagler County School System was treated to a classroom-based conservation program.

# Georgia Aquarium Welcomes *Sea Lions*

In March 2016, Georgia Aquarium opened our newest gallery, SunTrust Pier 225, featuring California sea lions.



In Pier 225's Under the Boardwalk sea lion presentation, guests are virtually transported to the coast of California for a close-up look at this incredible species. Visitors have a chance to see the sea lions of Georgia Aquarium in an intimate setting, watch their behaviors and learn more about these amazing marine mammals and their habitat. Trainers interact with this notably social species of pinniped while educating guests on the dangers they face in their natural environment and key environmental factors that impact them.



Some of these sea lions are survivors of California's Unusual Mortality Event (UME), in which thousands of sea lion pups were found stranded and emaciated on the beaches of California. After stranding multiple times, several individuals were deemed non-releasable by the government, and they were transferred to Georgia Aquarium.

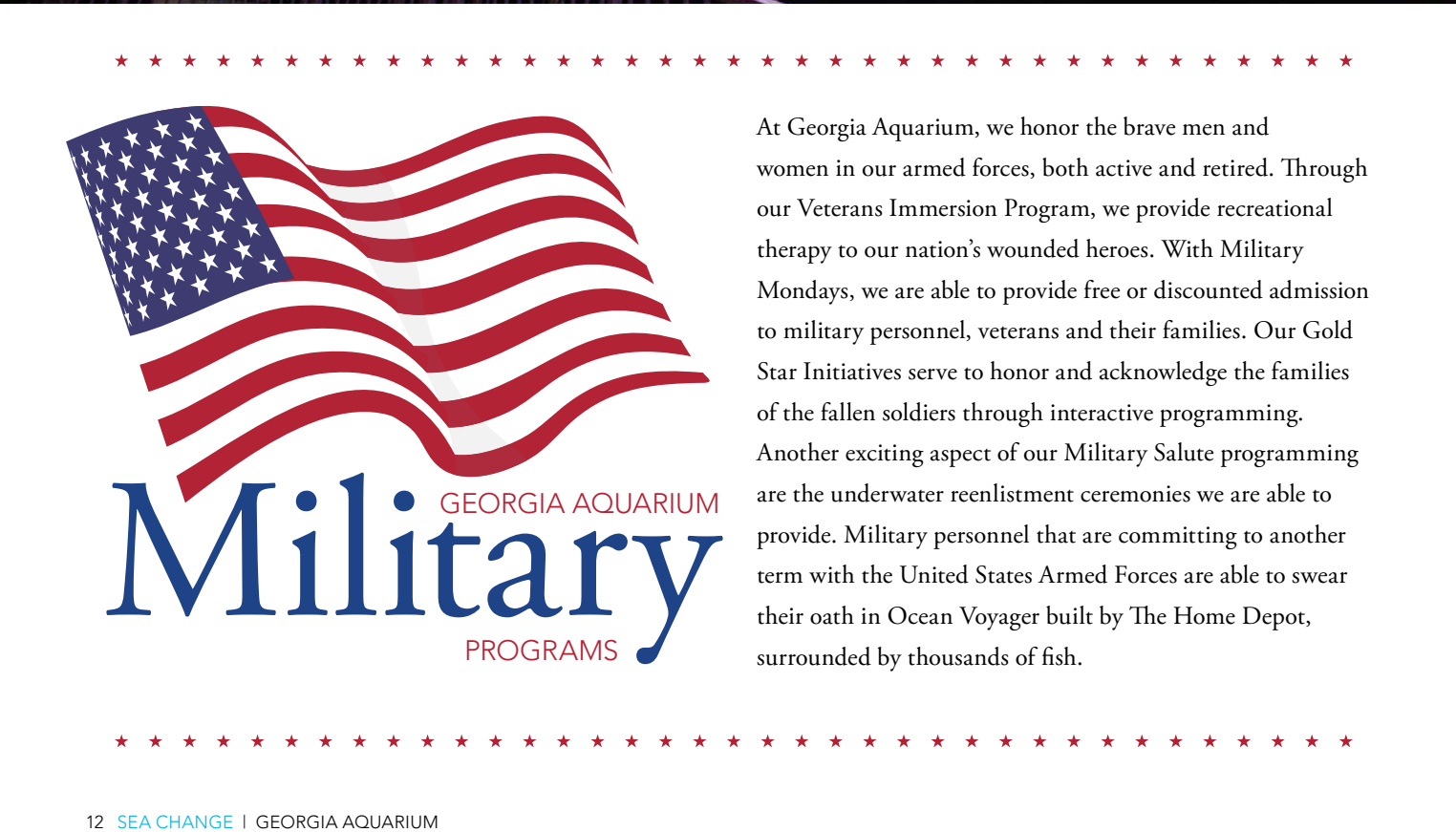
The UME began in January 2013, likely due to a dramatic shift in the availability of prey. As prey populations moved farther offshore, nursing females traveled farther from their pups to forage. Many had a difficult time returning. As a result, the pups weaned too early and came ashore looking for alternate sources for food. In both 2015 and 2016, Georgia Aquarium provided marine mammal stranding facilities along the California coast with expert care, treatment, and support.

*"We are very excited to finally introduce the sea lion exhibit to the public. We have welcomed sea lions to their new home at Georgia Aquarium and have been working with them on training, veterinary care, and engaging in educational presentations for our guests. Introducing this fascinating species to people that may never see them in their lifetime is a wonderful opportunity," said Will Elgar, Director of Animal Training, Pinnipeds. "The Unusual Mortality Events happening along our coasts are concerning. It's important that we educate our guests about sea lions and the events happening in our oceans and environment so they can care about them and become invested in making our planet healthier."*



Georgia Aquarium  
hosted our 11th annual  
Aqua Vino event in 2016!

Aqua Vino, Georgia Aquarium's premier food and wine fundraising event, featured over 200 wines generously donated by United Distributors and tastings from popular Atlanta restaurants. This year's event highlighted the charismatic California sea lion, and proceeds from the event will help support sea lion research and conservation efforts.



The Veterans Immersion Program, founded in 2008, is our way of supporting the inspiring heroes in our armed forces. Georgia Aquarium is honored to provide this unique experience to complement current rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Participants challenge themselves with an experience outside their comfort zones, encounter enormous animals, and for some, relax and move in the water in ways they may not be able to on land.

A Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist leads the largest team of Handicapped Scuba Certified Dive Masters and Instructors in the world in supporting these honored guests. Each member of the Dive Team is trained to lead divers and swimmers with disabilities on their journey, ensuring their care and safety. Our goal is to have the veterans leave the experience with a positive feeling that supports the need for ongoing adaptation to life after war.

The Veterans Immersion Program provides individuals, corporations and foundations with a means of donating funds to help Georgia Aquarium support veterans' existing goals for rehabilitation and the chance to experience a positive, life-changing moment with some of the world's most magnificent animals.

Honor. Gratitude. Rock & Roll.

On June 18th, Georgia Aquarium hosted a benefit concert for our military programs headlined by Gary Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band. One hundred percent of the proceeds from the concert were divided between Georgia Aquarium's Veterans Immersion Program and the Gary Sinise Foundation.



All military, veterans and their family members were eligible to receive complimentary concert tickets, thanks to a generous grant provided by The Marcus Foundation and The Home Depot Foundation.

# Thank You to Our Partners, Sponsors and Friends

Georgia Aquarium is a proud supporter of the United States Armed Forces and dedicated to impacting military personnel with positive and therapeutic experiences. Everything we do under the umbrella of Military Salute is thanks to its founding partner, The Home Depot Foundation. Military Salute would not be where it is today without this tremendous support and commitment. Other foundations, corporations and individual donors support the therapeutic programs like Veterans Immersion Program and the Gold Star Families Program, but it is all possible because of our partnership with The Home Depot Foundation.



Other major supporters of the Veterans Immersion Program include Lockheed Martin and Great Clips. In addition, a grant for our work with Shepherd SHARE was made possible by Choate Construction.

Thank you to all who support the brave men and women  
of our Armed Forces.





# EDUCATION

GEORGIA AQUARIUM

## STEAMING *forward*

Georgia Aquarium and Georgia-Pacific partnered together this year to create an exciting new video series called STEAM Forward! STEAM Forward is an educational video series that highlights the variety of STEAM career pathways that exist within the city of Atlanta. In each episode, Georgia Aquarium peels back the layers of day-to-day operations and meets the experts behind the scenes that make the Aquarium run like clockwork every day. By collaborating with community partners such as Georgia-Pacific, STEAM Forward presents compelling looks into the day-to-day lives of STEAM professionals in a wide variety of jobs.

Starting by taking a close look at our own institutional ecosystem, viewers meet authorities in fields including life support engineering, chemistry, and nutrition that make Georgia Aquarium's heart beat each day. Students learn that there are a variety of avenues one can take to advocate for ocean health and aquatic life, including (but certainly not limited to) marine biology!

Spotlighting what professionals with STEAM careers actually do each day provides an authentic context for learning, and also helps students answer that critical question: "why am I learning this?"

In clearly illustrating the opportunities and real-world applications of STEAM, we hope to inspire the curiosity of young people and expose them to career paths they can become passionate about and strive towards.



The target audience of STEAM Forward is middle school students and teachers in grades 6-8 in the United States (according to the United States Census, there are about 11 million middle school students in the United States). Typically, this is the age when student engagement drops in the classroom and also when students begin to make choices about what career paths they will pursue.



## Sponsored Education Admissions (SEA)

When Georgia Aquarium first opened, we talked about “bringing the ocean to Atlanta.” Our Sponsored Education Admissions Program shows our commitment to meet the needs of students who are unable to visit under normal circumstances. For the almost 50,000 students that attended the Aquarium each year with the help of our SEA Program, the wish to see the most dynamic creatures in the ocean up close becomes a reality – free of charge.

Throughout their experience, students will come face to face with aquatic animals from around the world while learning how we care for them, where they live and what we need to do to ensure they thrive in their natural environment. The SEA Program provides an avenue for individuals, corporations, and foundations to donate funds that will in turn enable students to explore the underwater world and participate in an invaluable educational experience that can shape their impact on the world.

### SEA Program Facts

- Offers instructor-led programming designed around Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math
- Provides free admission to students in grades pre-k through 12 in need of financial assistance
- Provides teachers with pre- and post-curricular support.
- Depends solely on private funding

### Major SEA Support

- Google (Google Field Trip Days), Ford Motor Company Fund, Publix Super Markets Charities, Thalia & Michael C. Carlos Foundation
- Georgia Aquarium also supports Professional Development Workshops for teachers:

Creeks to Coast made possible through grants from Georgia Pacific Foundation and Georgia Power Foundation

Rivers to Reefs made possible by Gordon State College as part of the Teacher Quality Grant Ocean Exploration Grant from National Marine Sanctuary Foundation

Learn more about our Sponsored Education Admissions program at [GeorgiaAquarium.org/SupportSEA](http://GeorgiaAquarium.org/SupportSEA)

# 129,143

total students served in 2016

# 108

counties reached with our school programming, or 68% of the state of Georgia

# 2,058

total school groups total served

# 24

states reached including Hawaii and Washington, DC

# 1,000,000

one millionth student served in May 2016

## All Educational Programming

# 64

students served from India! Delhi Public School and Vibgyor High International School

# 52,984

students sponsored from Georgia Title I schools and non-profits in Georgia to attend at no charge

# \$688,792

fiscal support for our SEA program

## Sponsored Education Admissions Programming

# 69

counties reached, or 43% of the state of Georgia including every county in Metro Atlanta.

# 75,000

number of students expected to be served in 2017 with our Sponsored Education Admissions program

# 562

groups served with our SEA program

# Thank You to Our Donors

As a 501(c)3 not-for-profit, we rely on the support of our community to ensure that we can continue our groundbreaking research initiatives, conservation efforts, educational programs, and community partnerships. By supporting Georgia Aquarium, these generous donors allow us to make a positive impact on the health and welfare of aquatic life from around the globe and remain at the forefront of aquatic science.

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RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION,  
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FUTURE OF OUR AQUATIC WORLD. EVERY  
TICKET SOLD CONTRIBUTES  
TO THESE EFFORTS, BUT  
WE STILL NEED YOUR HELP.

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AND FOR THE WONDROUS  
LIFE THAT INHABITS IT.

*You can support the work being done in  
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Your contributions are vital to the success of  
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