



A 'hands-on' experience with local marine life

By AMY HANCOCK, TOURISM UCLUELET

"Here," she said as she passed over a gooey, cylinder shaped, blob-like creature from the touch tank into the hands of a hesitant little girl. "Hold a sea cucumber."

With wide eyes the girl held out her hands to receive the thing. Once she had it in her hold she turned and brightly smiled at anyone in the room she could make eye contact

with as if to say, "Look what I've got!"

Not only do you get to touch the creatures, you will also learn how they move, eat, and protect themselves from predators. Sea cucumbers are among the star fish, anemones, snails, clams, and other colourful specimens that you will discover at the Ucluelet Aquarium. Visitors

get an up close and personal experience with local marine life at this unique mini aquarium, the only one of its kind on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

The Ucluelet Aquarium collects all of their undersea critters each spring from local waters in Barkley and Clayoquot Sounds. The wild life is well cared for and displayed, giving you a personal encounter with the local marine life around Ucluelet.

"This year we collected specimens at Big Beach and Terrace Beach wearing wet suits and gently dragging a fine meshed net through the water," said Laura Griffith-Cochrane from the Ucluelet Aquarium. They were collecting on these beaches in the early spring.

Creatures like pipe fish, silver spotted sculpins, shrimp, and greenlings are gathered this way. Laura also shared that staff also collect during intertidal walks at low tide and find snails, crabs, chitons, anemones and star fish.

"We also have diving expeditions for a lot of our fish. We dive in Ucluelet Harbour and

Clayoquot Sound for smaller rockfish, nude brouchs, snails, urchins, flounders, sea stars, sea pens, perch, grant barnacles, crabs, anemones ..." Laura paused, "there's a lot!"

After the season, everything is released back into the ocean. All the specimens, plants, and even the rocks and sand are returned to their natural habitat.

People of all ages congregate around touch tanks and aquarium displays. The staff and volunteers at the Ucluelet Aquarium keep busy explaining our local marine bio diversity, answering questions, giving demonstrations, and passing around colourful critters to bright eyed little ones.

Construction is currently underway for the aquarium's new, permanent building on Ucluelet's waterfront. This new aquarium will be just metres from the current location on the harbour and is being constructed of recycled materials. The new facility will include a class room that will act as an activity centre, dynamic displays reflecting changes in the marine environment, and a constant water flow system to demonstrate outdoor tide pools, and enrich the habitat of Ucluelet's harbour.

"We plan on having the doors open to the new aquarium by next season," said Laura with a smile on her face.

Other marine life you will discover at the Ucluelet Aquarium are Morning Sun Stars, a Starry Flounder, a baby Octopus, and a school of Tube Snouts. Starry Flounders look like baby halibut, the baby Octopus only has seven legs, and the school of Tube Snouts are able to move as one through the water. The world that exists in our ocean is very cool!

This non-profit aquarium is a must see when visiting Ucluelet. It is fun and engaging for children and adults, a true learning experience, and will become a memory you will always cherish. With a few weeks left of the summer holidays it is not too late to plan a family vacation to Ucluelet, your destination is closer than you think.

So gather the kids and put out your hands ... there are sea cucumbers just waiting to be held!

To participate in this monthly feature, contact:

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Photos courtesy Tourism Ucluelet



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