



MYSTIC AQUARIUM STRATEGIC PLAN

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LETTER FROM LEADERSHIP

Dear Friends,

Mystic Aquarium has always been a place of wonder, a place where guests of all ages come face-to-face with marine life, where conservation comes alive, and where science meets storytelling. But behind the daily rhythm of feedings, rescue calls, school group arrivals, and research discoveries, something even more powerful has been quietly taking shape: a collective vision for the future.

Over the past year, we've listened—closely—to our staff, stakeholders, guests, and community members. Their voices, ideas, and passions shaped the plan you now hold in your hands. This is more than a document; it's a bold, adaptive roadmap that charts our course for the next three years. A living, breathing guide for the next three years of our collective work.

It is grounded in the incredible legacy of our first fifty years and propelled by our renewed sense of purpose. This plan reflects not only our aspirations, but also our responsibility, to our animals, to our people, to our region, and to the global community of ocean stewards and scientists of which we are proud to be a part of.

Our guiding theme, ***Embrace Change, Drive Progress***, is more than a slogan. It's a call to action. In a world that is rapidly evolving, ecologically, technologically, and socially, we know we must be ready to evolve with it. This plan helps us do just that. It provides a framework for making intentional, values-driven decisions, while remaining flexible enough to adapt as new opportunities arise. Whether it's revitalizing habitats, deepening our community connections, or building stronger internal culture, we are committed to transformative action.

We're excited to share this vision with you, not as a finished product, but as an invitation. Whether you are a visitor, a donor, a partner, or a dedicated member of our team, your support and engagement make this journey possible. We hope this plan inspires you, as it has inspired us, and reminds you why Mystic Aquarium continues to be a place of learning, leadership, and limitless potential.

Thank you for believing in us and in what's next.

With enthusiasm and gratitude,
The Mystic Aquarium Leadership Team

WHO WE ARE & WHO WE ASPIRE TO BE

Mystic Aquarium was founded on the belief that the ocean has the power to inspire, to educate, and to connect us all. Since opening our doors in 1973 as the Mystic Marinelife Aquarium, we have grown from a coastal curiosity into a nationally recognized leader in marine science, conservation, and immersive guest experiences. Over the course of five decades, through moments of transformation, challenge, and extraordinary opportunity, we have remained steadfast in our mission: to inspire people to care for and protect our ocean planet.

For over 50 years, Mystic Aquarium has been a place where wonder meets purpose and it holds a special place in the hearts of generations of visitors, scientists, and conservationists. Nestled along Connecticut's scenic shoreline, it is a place where awe meets action, where guests come to experience the thrill of standing face to face with a beluga whale, a California sea lion, or a South African penguin, and where research and rescue efforts ripple outward to make a difference across our region and beyond.

We are proud to be one of only two facilities in the United States that care for Steller sea lions, and the only aquarium in New England with beluga whales. We are also the only authorized marine mammal rescue facility serving Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Fishers Island, NY, an essential responsibility that connects our expertise to critical needs on the ground and in the water.

From our earliest days, Mystic Aquarium has championed innovation and exploration. Our long-standing relationship with Dr. Robert Ballard and the Ocean Exploration Trust brought groundbreaking discoveries, including the story of the Titanic, to life through exhibits that bridged deep-sea exploration and public education. From the creation of our expansive Arctic Coast beluga habitat to our pioneering efforts in beluga whale care, our campus and capabilities have evolved continuously to meet the moment.

WHO WE ARE & WHO WE ASPIRE TO BE

And while the last 50 years have been filled with remarkable milestones, the years since the COVID-19 pandemic have tested us and transformed us in ways we could not have imagined. In the face of uncertainty, we adapted. We innovated. We came together as a team, doubled down on our mission, and found new ways to serve our guests, our animals, and our community. The challenges of recent years have sharpened our focus and clarified our values: excellence in animal care, authentic connections with our audiences, leadership in science and rescue, and a deep commitment to environmental stewardship.

Today, Mystic Aquarium stands at an inflection point. We are more than a destination; we are a voice for our ocean planet. We are a home to rare and remarkable animals. We are a laboratory, a classroom, and a safe harbor. And we are a place where curiosity is sparked, where empathy is nurtured, and where the next generation of conservation leaders is born.

As we look to the future, we do so with confidence in our foundation and clarity in our vision. This strategic plan, shaped by our staff, our partners, and our community, reaffirms who we are and outlines where we are going. We're building on a strong foundation, while daring to envision a Mystic Aquarium that sets the standard not just regionally, but globally—for animal care, environmental leadership, and inclusive engagement. We will embrace change. We will drive progress. And we will continue to grow, adapt, and lead with purpose in everything we do.



POWERED BY PARTICIPATION

A THOUGHTFUL, INCLUSIVE, AND ITERATIVE APPROACH

Strategic planning is how we turn ambition into action. Over the past year, Mystic Aquarium's strategic planning process has been guided by one core principle: that our direction forward should reflect the voices and expertise of those who know this organization best—our staff, leadership, volunteers, Board, and broader stakeholders. With guidance from Canopy Strategic Partners and in partnership with leaders across all levels of the organization, we undertook a comprehensive and participatory planning effort that not only defined our future priorities but also ensured meaningful buy-in.

THE PROCESS UNFOLDED IN THREE CORE PHASES:

- 1 Synthesis: grounding the plan in our existing efforts and defining the project roadmap
- 2 Reality: pressure-testing our aspirations against practical objectives and current realities
- 3 Action: transforming ideas into a 3-year roadmap

This approach generated over 150 comments at all-staff town halls, yielded 216 stakeholder survey responses, and engaged working groups spanning all departments. A Strategic Planning Task Force of the Board, our C-Suite, and Leadership Team provided consistent input. As a result, four guiding goals emerged and were refined, each representing a fundamental component of our mission and operations.

POWERED BY PARTICIPATION

1 ENHANCE WORKFORCE & CULTURE

Focus: Our people—staff and volunteers—are the heart of Mystic Aquarium. This goal centers on fostering a supportive, mission-connected workplace that attracts, retains, and empowers exceptional talent.

WHAT WE HEARD:

- Top staff priority: 24% of staff named investing in team and culture as their top 3-year goal.
- Staff emphasized the need for clarity of roles, professional development opportunities, and increased cross-departmental collaboration.
- Working Group and Town Hall participants expressed a shared desire for consistent communication, stronger interdepartmental partnerships, and policies that reflect shared values.

HOW IT SHAPED THE PLAN:

- This goal evolved to focus not just on workforce satisfaction, but also on engagement through deeper alignment with our mission.
- Input led to a strong emphasis on cross-training, inclusive communication strategies, and master planning that prioritizes staff needs (including facilities).
- We elevated people-first as a strategic imperative and not just an HR function—central to achieving excellence in every other area.

POWERED BY PARTICIPATION

2

SAVE ANIMALS

Focus: This goal represents the core of our conservation mission—animal well-being, rescue, rehabilitation, and species preservation.

WHAT WE HEARD:

- In our town halls, animal care and conservation consistently emerged as our perceived “North Star.”
- Staff expressed pride in our commitment to animal wellness and research but also cited aging facilities, fragmented Animal Rescue Clinic, and regulatory challenges as obstacles.
- There was a strong desire to see rescue, care, and research better connected, both operationally and in public storytelling.

HOW IT SHAPED THE PLAN:

- Feedback affirmed the need for facility updates and strategic investment in habitats and animal care infrastructure.
- We prioritized positioning Mystic as a leader in rescue-driven conservation and research, drawing inspiration from our benchmarking study of peer institutions.
- This goal now focuses on local and global conservation impact, aligning with staff input on prioritizing local species and engaging guests in rescue narratives.
- Acknowledging our differentiators—our veterinary team and care standards—was critical to defining clear, actionable objectives under this goal.

POWERED BY PARTICIPATION

3 ELEVATE LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

Focus: As educators and storytellers, we inspire action through every guest encounter and community interaction. This goal underscores our commitment to meaningful, mission-driven engagement on- and off-site.

WHAT WE HEARD:

- Staff called for deeper investment in educational storytelling, using tools like augmented reality and more dynamic, emotional narratives.
- Goals focused on using fun as a learning tool, increasing community engagement, and building stronger buy-in for conservation.
- Participants suggested that connecting our guest experiences more directly to our rescue and conservation work could strengthen impact.

HOW IT SHAPED THE PLAN:

- This goal moved from a traditional education focus to a more immersive, audience-centered model of engagement.
- Staff ideas shaped goals like enhancing mission-driven guest experiences, leveraging our outdoor campus, and engaging new audiences through innovative platforms.
- Benchmarks showed successful models for integrating rescue into visitor experiences (e.g., South Carolina Aquarium's Sea Turtle Care Center™), which led us to explore new programming and potential physical spaces to bring rescue work into public view.
- We affirmed that joy and curiosity are essential tools in the conservation toolbox—learning through wonder.
- We elevated people-first as a strategic imperative and not just an HR function—central to achieving excellence in every other area.

POWERED BY PARTICIPATION

4

STRENGTHEN RESOURCES

Focus: Financial sustainability and infrastructure are essential to every other aspect of our mission. This goal focuses on strengthening philanthropic support, diversifying revenue, and investing in critical physical infrastructure

WHAT WE HEARD:

- Staff and working groups prioritized infrastructure upgrades, with emphasis on animal habitats and staff facilities.
- Participants emphasized the need to grow awareness of what Mystic does—especially in rescue—and leverage that visibility in fundraising.
- There was strong support for cultivating a culture of philanthropy, deeper community partnerships, and expanded revenue streams.

HOW IT SHAPED THE PLAN:

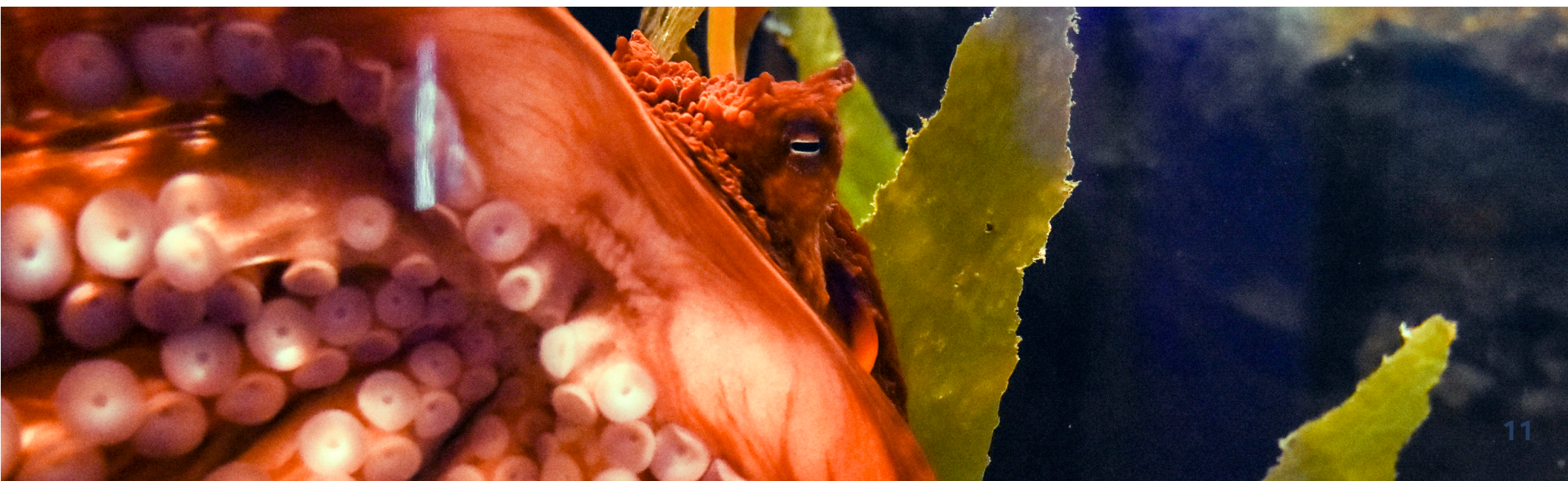
- This goal reflects a shift toward mission-driven fundraising, where donors are invited into our impact stories—particularly those centered on animal rescue and research.
- It acknowledges both the opportunity and necessity of strategic capital investments, and of telling our story in ways that inspire trust and giving.
- Benchmarking affirmed our opportunity to increase the visibility of our work and explore new, mission-aligned revenue options, such as guided rescue tours or interactive educational programs.

POWERED BY PARTICIPATION

RESULT IMPLEMENTATION & ACCOUNTABILITY

The result of this thoughtful, inclusive planning process is a shared vision for the next three years that is bold, realistic, and rooted in our values. And importantly, it's built to evolve. This plan is a living document. Action plans were created for each goal and include defined KPIs, timelines, and budget considerations. Cross-functional Working Groups, supported by Leadership oversight, are driving this phase forward already. Progress will be regularly tracked and reported over the course of the three-year plan, ensuring we remain adaptive and accountable to our goals.

Our goal is not just to have a plan, but to live it—with transparency, accountability, and inspiration.





PLAN FRAMEWORK

A UNIFYING PURPOSE

At the heart of Mystic Aquarium's strategic plan is a clear, powerful aspiration: ***Embrace Change, Drive Progress.***

This rallying cry became our unifying purpose, a lens through which every goal, objective, and decision was shaped. It reflects not only the evolution of Mystic Aquarium in a changing world, but also our deep-rooted determination to lead that change—for animals, ecosystems, and people. It is the promise we make to our community, to ourselves, and to future generations: that progress is possible when we welcome it with boldness and clarity.

This purpose didn't come from a boardroom or a tagline workshop. It came from months of listening, gathering insights from every corner of the organization, inviting ideas, testing language, and refining until the words felt true, urgent, and energizing. It's a purpose meant to guide us every day for the next three years—and inspire everyone who engages with Mystic Aquarium to be part of something bigger.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES: WHO WE ARE & WHERE WE'RE GOING

Our mission, vision, and values serve as the foundation of this plan—anchoring our strategic goals in who we are, what we believe, and what we're striving to achieve.

MISSION: Protect aquatic life and empower communities to save our oceans.

Our mission is our “why”—the reason we exist. Through this plan, we reimagined and refined our mission to be more active, more urgent, and more inclusive. It's not just about inspiring others—it's about empowering them to act alongside us. Whether caring for an animal, engaging a guest, or conducting fieldwork, this mission reflects the shared heartbeat of our staff, volunteers, and supporters.

PLAN FRAMEWORK

VISION: A bright future for our blue planet.

Our vision is the world we want to help create. It's a bold and hopeful statement—one that captures the end goal of everything we do. This is a future where ecosystems thrive, aquatic animals are protected, and communities are empowered to be part of a sustainable, global movement. It's an invitation: come help us build it.

CORE VALUES: Caring, Conservation, Collaboration

Our values define our culture and shape how we show up—every day, in every role. They emerged from deep conversations across the organization about what makes Mystic us.

CARING. We actively care for our animals, our guests, our planet, and each other in all that we do.

This value reflects our deep empathy and our commitment to responsible stewardship, not just of animals—but of people and our shared future.

CONSERVATION. We champion progress for a more sustainable world through our choices and actions.

More than a belief, conservation at Mystic is a verb—it shows up in our work, our partnerships, and the messages we share with our audiences.

COLLABORATION. We are enthusiastic and active partners in our internal and external communities.

Collaboration is how we innovate, how we grow, and how we make progress possible. We know we're better together—and that every voice adds value.

OUR STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Through surveys, listening sessions, working groups, and leadership retreats, we asked a critical question: *What must Mystic Aquarium focus on to thrive in the years ahead?* The answers were remarkably clear and consistent. From hundreds of ideas and discussions, we distilled four core goals, each one paired with strategic objectives that turn broad aspirations into focused action.

Each objective within these goals was carefully crafted through collaborative sessions, benchmarking, and the insights of our staff and community. This is a plan designed to be used, adapted, and celebrated—and we invite everyone to take part in bringing it to life. These are more than words; together, they form a living blueprint for progress. They inform how we care for our animals, support our team, engage our guests, and steward our resources.





OUR STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES

GOAL 1: ENHANCE WORKFORCE & CULTURE

Invest in Mystic Aquarium's team and culture so that staff and volunteers feel motivated by the mission.

This goal recognizes that our people are our greatest asset because we believe that inspired teams create powerful impact. Throughout the planning process, we heard a call for more transparency, trust, and engagement. Staff want to feel seen, heard, and valued—and to have clear pathways to contribute to the mission beyond their job titles. Our objectives here focus on deepening staff engagement, improving communication, and building a culture of belonging and purpose.

Objectives:

- a. Create opportunities for staff to be actively engaged in conservation, philanthropy, and advocacy.
- b. Develop and execute consistent, cross-departmental communication processes that increase organization-wide transparency.
- c. Cultivate a welcoming, unifying culture that improves retention and trust for staff, interns, and volunteers.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS: Increased staff engagement in mission-driven opportunities, improved communication flow, higher satisfaction and retention across teams.

OUR STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES

GOAL 2: SAVE ANIMALS

Advance animal wellbeing and conservation through Mystic Aquarium's expertise, research, and public engagement.

From world-class veterinary care to pioneering rescue and research, our animal care has always been a cornerstone of Mystic's identity, but this plan calls us to go further. It reflects a growing expectation, both internally and externally, to lead boldly in rescue, rehabilitation, and research. This goal prioritizes both excellence in care and innovation in how we share our impact. This goal calls us to invest in habitats, animal wellbeing, and visibility for our Rescue Program.

Objectives:

- a. Revitalize and launch integrated programs with visible impact on animal wellbeing, rescue, or species and habitat conservation
- b. Take actions to protect long-term animal collection sustainability for Mystic Aquarium.
- c. Invest in and expand the Animal Rescue Program to further its impact and enhance its reputation.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS: Increased visibility of programs, strengthened animal collection strategy, broader support and funding for rescue efforts.

OUR STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES

GOAL 3: ELEVATE LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

Position Mystic Aquarium to become a leader in experiential learning through engagement that drives conservation action.

This goal reimagines education not as something we deliver—but as something we spark. Guests want meaning. Communities want relevance. And learners of all ages want to feel part of the story. Here, we’re reimagining guest experiences to educate, inspire, and drive conservation action by focusing on access, inspiration, and connection. From AR to outreach, we are meeting audiences where they are and helping them take the next step.

Objectives:

- a. Reach more audiences with conservation action messaging by leveraging technology.
- b. Deliver a cross-departmental interpretation strategy that integrates “protecting aquatic life” messaging throughout the guest journey, both on and off site.
- c. Audit existing accessibility of our experiences and content and prioritize investments that will help us reach a broader audience.
- d. Advance active community engagement in and awareness of Aquarium conservation priorities.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS: Expanded reach, improved guest feedback, stronger brand recognition as a conservation leader, more inclusive programming and messaging.

OUR STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES

GOAL 4: STRENGTHEN RESOURCES

Secure Mystic Aquarium's future by growing revenue and investing in physical infrastructure.

A strong mission needs a strong foundation. Through this plan, we are committing to securing the resources – financial, physical, and reputational – that will sustain Mystic into the future. This includes reimagining our fundraising strategy, planning for major capital improvements, and creating spaces that reflect our excellence to support every mission-driven priority.

Objectives:

- a. Diversify fundraising and revenue generation strategies to support strategic plan priorities.
- b. Over the 3-year plan period, increase Board and community commitment to philanthropic support.
- c. Create a master plan that identifies both long-term vision and short-term critical priorities, supported by a Capital Campaign strategy.
- d. Invest in critical capital expense projects, prioritizing physical plant upgrades and animal habitat improvements.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS: More diversified and resilient revenue, increased giving and donor engagement, progress on capital projects, modernized and future-ready facilities.



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RESEARCH
PROTECTION OF SEA LIFE

FROM FRAMEWORK TO ACTION

The plan doesn't end with goals and objectives—it begins there. In the final phase of the strategic planning process, cross-functional teams translated each goal into detailed action plans that include:

- Key performance indicators (KPIs)
- Timelines and milestones
- Assigned accountability
- Resource and budget considerations

Every action is grounded in reality, shaped by staff expertise, and designed to be both aspirational and achievable. This is not a plan that will sit on a shelf—it's one that will drive daily decisions, shape how we grow, and keep us aligned on what matters most.





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