

Why Are Aquariums So Popular?

By Ato Ekusa

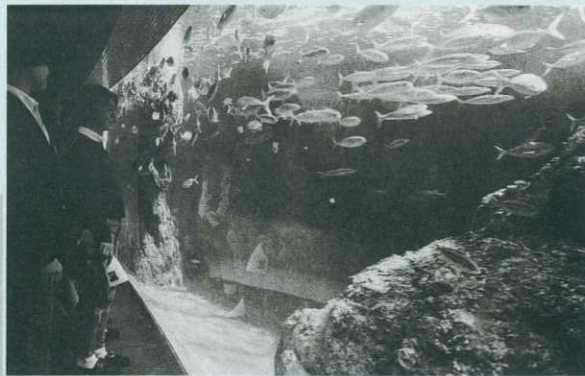
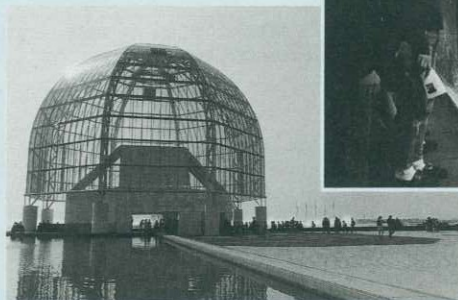
A campaign dubbed "Save the Animals at the London Zoo" started this summer. In recent years, the London Zoo has experienced a dramatic drop in visitors to just one-third of peak levels, and it is feared that the 160-year-old zoo may have to close its doors. The campaign was triggered by concerns that if the zoo shuts down, the displaced animals will end up being killed.

Japanese zoos face a similar crisis. At Tokyo's Ueno Zoo, the number of visitors has plummeted from a high of 7.72 million in 1984 to only 4.5 million in 1990. The situation is even more severe at Tama Zoological Park in the suburbs of Tokyo. Since recording 1.89 million visitors in 1984, the park has seen the number of visitors drop steadily, to 1.26 million in 1990.

Zoo managers are trying to devise solutions. Ueno Zoo is forging ahead with a plan to revitalize the zoo as a center for conserving the genes of rare animal species, and as a place to learn about the global environment. Instead of merely showing animals in cages, this plan urges a switch to an exhibition style which would help visitors deepen their understanding of ecological systems. Some projects have already begun, including a miniature jungle, called the "Forest of Gorillas and Tigers," and there are plans to build a reptile house to capitalize on the recent reptile pet boom.

While zoos, the forerunners of theme parks, are in trouble, aquariums are enjoying a wave of success.

In its first year after opening in October of 1989, Tokyo Sea Life Park on the eastern waterfront of Tokyo was swamped with 3.91 million visitors, more than double original estimates. At times, the resulting shortage of toilet facilities kept visitors waiting longer than two hours. One source of this tremendous enthusiasm for the aquarium was a series of articles which appeared in young people's magazines prior to opening day, billing



Tokyo Sea Life Park has proved immensely popular with children and young people since its opening two years ago.

the aquarium as a trendy new spot. Even on weekdays, the stream of visitors continued. Another example of the rising popularity of aquariums is Sunshine Aquarium in Ikebukuro, often used as the setting for parties.

Why are people so interested in aquariums? According to a 23-year-old woman who works for a trading company and has visited the Tokyo Sea Life Park several times, "I feel bad for the animals penned up at the zoo. But the atmosphere is different here. Even though the fish are in tanks, there is something romantic about it." "I've been going to zoos since I was a kid, so it's nothing new. But aquariums are fascinating," says a 21-year-old male college student.

Aquarium visitors also point out, "It doesn't have that zoo smell," and "The water makes it more attractive." A 26-year-old woman employed at a securities company explains, "The Tokyo Sea Life Park is an impressive building. The glass-plated dome creates a nice environment. It's like going to a popular shopping spot." The stylish hotel and terrace restaurants built inside the park seem to be producing the intended results.

Osaka Aquarium is designed to take advantage of this trendiness to attract visitors. The eight-story main building is equipped with the world's largest tank,

at 5,400 tons, containing a three-dimensional re-creation of the ocean's ecosystem. In the adjoining park, developers have assembled restaurants from around the world and added night clubs and discos. Packed with young people until late into the night, it has become Osaka's No. 1 night spot.

Koji Nakamura, managing director of Osaka Waterfront Development, a semi-public corporation which runs this aquarium, proudly explains, "The traditional family-oriented strategy of zoos just doesn't work anymore. Here, we appeal to a wide audience from adolescents to young mothers."

Delving into the mysterious world of the sea, the next great frontier after space, aquariums enjoy a popularity that shows few signs of weakening. On the other hand, impeded by animal rights movements and the regulations of the Washington Treaty on the protection of wildlife, the outlook for a recovery in the popularity of zoos is dim. The growing attraction of aquariums, not only as places to view sea life, but as new spots for entertainment and fun, looks bound to continue. ■

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