

Sea World prepares for opening of marine-life park in San Antonio

By Elisa Hutchins
Staff Writer

Kandu the killer whale has splashed down at what's being called the largest marine-life park in the country as Sea World of Texas gets ready for its scheduled opening April 15 in San Antonio.

Locally, the Bryan-College Station Chamber of Commerce is receiving several calls asking for more information on the park.

"We're getting three to four phone calls a week to find out about Sea World," Chamber of Commerce official Kim Autrey said. "There is an interest in the park locally, but I haven't seen that much media coverage."

Sea World officials are banking on at least 70 percent to 80 percent of their first year business coming from Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana, George Stalle, manager of public relations at Sea World, said.

"Not only is Sea World an entertainment park," Stalle said, "but we are also an educational outlet on sea life and conservation."

"Over three million children have passed through the three other parks. It's like a huge classroom where kids can get hands-on knowledge of marine life."

"Right now our main concern is to get the park open. But when the park has been operating for a while, plans could be made to set up a Sea World Institute for research in Texas."

Stalle said this effort could involve other research programs, such as university-sponsored marine research programs, quite possibly including Texas A&M.

Sea World at San Diego helped to establish the Hubbs Research Institute Center, a 25-year-old non-profit, independent facility that has inspired several joint efforts between the park, San Diego State and the University of San Diego.

Don Kent, director of Hubbs, said the facility currently is working on a proposal for Sea World of Texas on the different research interests in Texas.

He said if a research institute is established, it also will be independent of the park, and Sea World's advanced facilities and equipment could aid researchers in the state greatly.

"I anticipate quite a few possibilities for research," Kent said. "One area is the endangered species of sea turtles."

"That could be a popular program in Texas and something that could get the institute or any joint efforts in motion. It would be something that is identifiable with Texas."

Kent said A&M researchers have done extensive work specifically with the Kemp's ridley sea turtle, an endangered turtle species found in Texas.

He said the possibilities are very good for collaborative work.

But both Kent and Stalle said this is in the future and that the main problem now is to get the park open.

The Texas Sea World will open in a city that is already the tourist capital of the state — San Antonio.

The \$140 million marine park will cover 250 acres in northwest San Antonio.

It will have 20 educational exhibits and six different attractions such as dolphin and killer-whale shows.

Stalle said no expenses have been spared in publicizing the opening of the fourth Sea World park in the country.

The others are located in California, Florida and Ohio.

The park is spending more than \$5 million in advertising and is receiving \$30 million in free promotional advertising from companies such as Pepsi and Kodak. These companies will be selling their products at Sea World.

Sales offices have been established in Chicago, Dallas and Houston.

Sea World may help A&M marine research

By Elisa Hutchins
Staff Writer

Sea World of Texas could boost the state's economy by as much as \$1 billion a year while enhancing marine research at Texas colleges and universities and Texas A&M could be one of the schools involved, said Don Kent, director of the Sea World/Hubbs Research Institute Center in San Diego.

"If I was in Texas, I would be very excited about the research possibilities that Sea World and a center could offer marine researchers," Kent said.

Hubbs is a non-profit and independent center from Sea World, but they have a close relationship. Kent said the center is working on a proposal concerning Texas research interests that will be sent to Sea World of Texas in a few weeks.

"The center performs research and informs the scientific public as well as the general public," Kent said. "But our biggest strong point is that we can carry out long-term experiments. And while it is still up in the air as to whether Texas will have such a center, it will probably be modeled after ours."

He said the 27 researchers at Sea World/Hubbs are professors at or have very strong ties with the university community.

Thane Wubbles, a research assistant who is working at A&M with Dr. David Owens in his study of Kemp ridley turtles (an endangered species of sea turtles found in Texas), said that Sea World/Hubbs already has contacted Owens by letter and established some ties.

"A&M is probably one of only two schools in the world that is conducting research on hormonal and reproductive behaviors of the Kemp's ridley right now," Wubbles said. "Sea World will have Kemp's ridleys at their park, and they wanted to get the lines of communication open."

He said a lot is still unknown about the Kemp's ridley but it can weigh up to 100 pounds. Females can take up to 50 years to mature.

Wubbles said Owens and his assistants are doing secondary research on the turtles with monies from Sea Grant. Sea Grant designates federal, state and donated funds to universities. Texas A&M is in the grant program.

Thomas Bright, director of the Sea Grant program at A&M, said the grant enables schools to carry out research and enhances conservation efforts.

A&M received about \$3.5 million from the grant for this fiscal year and earmarked \$100,000 for the Kemp's ridley research project.

"We welcome any additional funding or help from Sea World or

Representatives also are out promoting the new park in Europe, Mexico, Canada and Central America.

Stalle said that two specially equipped buses have been crisscrossing the country promoting the latest addition to the Sea World family.

One of the buses came through Bryan-College Station on March 17 to drop off information and get people interested in the San Antonio park.

Sea World of Texas chairman and former Sea World of San Diego president George Becker said, "We hope that news of the park will reach everyone in Texas by the time the park opens."

But Stalle said that the best publicity is coming from the media.

News of the arrival of Kandu, a 7,000-pound killer whale, drew

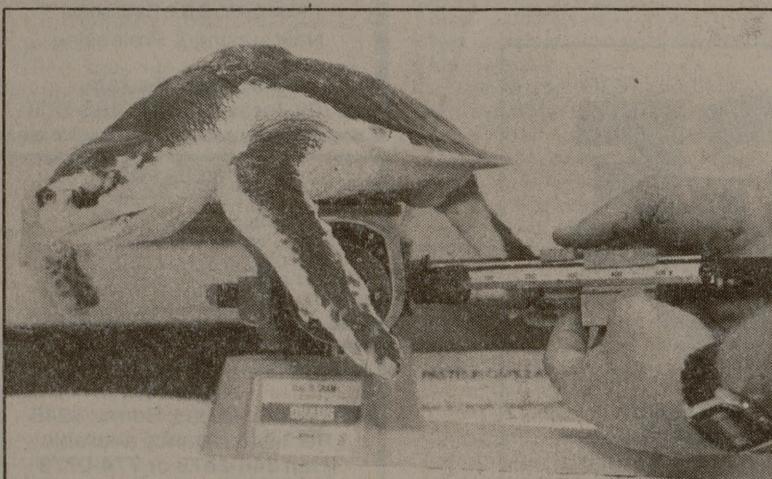


Photo by Jay Janner

An endangered Kemp ridley turtle gets weighed as part of A&M's efforts to save the population from extinction.

any other research body," he said. "The Kemp ridleys' sole nesting site is on the Gulf of Mexico (about 100 miles south of Brownsville). There used to be thousands of turtles in the 1940s, but now there are only about 500 known breeding females."

Bright said there has been a concerted effort between Mexico, the United States, Sea Grant, National Marine Services and Texas Park Services to rebuild the population. The program started 10 years ago and is headquartered in Galveston.

Wubbles said researchers at "Head Start," one such program to bolster the population, gather eggs from the Mexican breeding site and bring them to South Padre Island to hatch. They allow them to hatch in their environment and take the hatchlings to Galveston, where they are nurtured for a year.

The turtles are let go on a stretch of the South Padre beaches in the hopes that the females will return to the same site to lay their eggs.

"The effects of this program will not be determined for a few more years because it takes turtles 8 to 15 years to mature," he said. "Our research is secondary to this in that we study the turtle's reproductive processes by conducting hormonal and behavioral research."

He said that "Head Start" has been good for the turtle population but that the population is not bouncing back as fast as was expected.

"In order for conservation efforts to be successful, we have to try to answer the question of how sea turtles behave and how they reproduce," Wubbles said.

He said there has been some interest in captive breeding facilities like the farms in the Cayman Islands

to bring all the creatures to the park.

The completed park will contain the following attractions:

- Shamu Stadium, a 4,500-seat theater-in-the-round with a 264-foot diameter dome that is home to the killer whales.
 - Multi-species Stadium. It will house Pacific black whales and beluga whales in a similar exhibit pool.
 - Water Ski Lake. Professional skiers will perform tricks on a 12-acre lake.
 - Reef Presentation. Aquatic life from tropical seas presented in four aquariums, including a 400,000-gallon shark exhibit.
 - Whale and Dolphin Touching and Feeding Pool. Guests are encouraged to pet and feed dolphins and pilot whales.
- The park will be open seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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