

GrantSpace - Collaboration Hub

National Aquarium Institute

Participating Organizations

- National Aquarium, Washington, DC, Washington, DC

Primary Contact

Name: Donna Price

Title: Director of Planning

Email: dprice@aqua.org

Url: <http://www.aqua.org>

Please note that all data below was derived from the collaboration's nomination for the Collaboration Prize. None of the submitted data were independently verified for accuracy.

Formation

Type of Collaboration:

- Joint Programming to launch and manage one or more programs
- Administrative Consolidation to share, exchange, or provide back office services such as accounting, IT, human resources
- Merger by which governance, programs and administrative functions have been combined but which may or may not have included the integration into a single corporate entity.

Geographic Scope: National

Collaboration Focus Area:

- Animal Protection and Welfare
- Education
- Environment

Population Served:

- Children and Youth
- Families
- Other

Year Collaboration was Established: 2003

Goals Sought Through Collaboration:

- Expand reach and/or range of services / programs
- Serve more and/or different clients / audiences
- Leverage complementary strengths and/or assets

Reasons Prompting Collaboration:

- Competition for funding, donors and/or clientele
- High / increasing costs
- Advancement of a shared goal

Who Initiated Collaboration:

- Board member(s)
- Executive Director(s) / CEO(s) / President(s)

Number of Participating Organizations: 2

Were Partners Added or Dropped?: No

Consultant Role:

- To conduct financial due diligence
- To draft the governing agreement or provide other legal advice

The National Aquarium in Washington DC (NADC) was established in 1873 under the predecessor of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. In the early 1980's, Congress withdrew funding and a citizen group formed to fund the non-profit National Aquarium Society.

The National Aquarium in Baltimore (NAIB) opened in 1981. Though not a federal entity, Congress awarded NAIB the use of the "National" name because of the size and scope of its collection. An Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited organization, NAIB is a model for urban development. National and international developers, government officials, and other aquaria consult with NAIB on its design, innovative exhibits, and partnerships with educational, corporate, and civic organizations.

Over a 20-year period, NADC regularly consulted with NAIB on animal care and life support issues. In 2001, NAIB's Board approached NADC about forming an alliance. Board-led discussions resulted in an agreement to formally affiliate. Both Boards worked closely with the General Services Administration, the leaseholder for the NADC's Commerce Building space, and Guest Services, Inc., which operated the facility. Good-faith created during the negotiations and adding NADC's board chair to the NAIB Board were instrumental to success.

Talks with federal agencies, eager for a public platform for their conservation goals, led to support of the affiliation: NOAA provided renovation funding for NADC and National Marine Sanctuaries provided consultation services for new exhibits showcasing the national marine parks. In 2003, an affiliation agreement was signed. In 2005, the two entities integrated activities and functions, forming the National Aquarium Institute.

Management

Management Structure: Jointly managed by the Executive Directors of the partner organizations

Members of both Boards agreed to work together to develop a management structure. With legal guidance, they reviewed various models including alignment, merger, and holding company. An umbrella organization, the National Aquarium Institute, was created in 2005.

Each venue continues to have its own Board, with all members from both Boards serving on the Institute Board. While each venue has its own Executive Director (ED) and is autonomous in day-to-day operations, the Institute is responsible for providing the vision; determining long-term strategic direction; and overseeing the financial health of the entire enterprise. The vision, adopted in 2005, is to become a global voice in aquatic conservation issues.

NAIB, as the larger venue, provides human resources, finance and accounting, information technology, marketing, central reservations, and fundraising expertise. As an AZA-accredited institution, NAIB also provides knowledgeable animal health, life support, and exhibit design staff. Several NAIB staff members transferred to NADC to enhance animal care and life support. NADC, through its ED and proximity to the federal government, provides access to federal agencies and national conservation organizations.

The combined organization results in greater efficiency and effectiveness through integrated marketing, membership, visitation, and programs. The management structure allows for autonomous operation, joint visioning, planning, and financial oversight. Moreover, it establishes a strategic location in the Nation's capital for the Institute that advances the long-term vision of global leadership in aquatic conservation and education, allowing the Institute to strengthen and expand partnerships, program support, opportunities for funding, and influence that the two aquariums could not achieve individually.

Challenges

Challenges to Making the Collaboration Work:

- Addressing lack of staff or allocation of staff resources
- Coordinating / merging / integrating operations
- Costs of collaboration
- Coordination / integration of programs & services

As the flagship campus, NAIB consists of 3 buildings on 6 acres in downtown Baltimore, welcoming 1.5 million visitors each year. The smaller NADC facility has 1300 square feet in the Commerce Building, hosting more than 200,000 people annually.

At the time of the affiliation, the NAIB was in the midst of constructing a 65,000 sq. ft. addition, and its design, life support, and animal care staff were fully engaged. NADC's aging life support systems and exhibits did not meet NAIB's standards and immediate upgrades were necessary. It was a challenge to balance staff workloads to complete NAIB's capital project, upgrade the NADC facility, and integrate activities. Staff at both institutions, dedicated to maintaining the health of the animals, understood the importance of rapidly combining resources, and rose to the challenge.

As an urban development model, NAIB had the ability and willingness to share its resources. With greater credibility with federal agencies, NADC was able to secure grants from NOAA to complete essential backup systems and exhibit upgrades. Staff worked together to assess animal care needs: NAIB animal care, life support, and exhibit staff spent more than three years sharing their expertise. Upgrades were completed in 2009 and the DC venue is enjoying stable visitation, an increased membership program, and greater marketing exposure. Its future goals are to move into a larger space and achieve AZA accreditation.

Internal Efficiencies and Effectiveness:

- Fund development - Access to new / more sources of funding
- Human resources - Increased access to technical expertise (e.g. HR, Finance, IT)
- Improved marketing and communications, public relations and outreach - Improved marketing and communications, public relations and outreach

Community Impact:

- Increased collaboration with / among other community organizations (beyond the scope of the original collaboration)
- Improved quality of programs / services

Outcomes and benefits are measured by comparing how the 2 venues functioned separately and how they function now. NADC, with its newly refurbished and re-themed exhibits, operates at a higher level in areas of animal health; life support systems; water quality control; and exhibits and design expertise. Cost savings were achieved by using in-house staff for planning, design, and fabrication of the upgrades and a new gift shop increases earned revenue. NADC was in a position to negotiate an expanded and improved location on Museum Row. Both venues benefit from greater efficiency through combining administrative activities. The Institute gained credibility to develop strong local, federal, and international partnerships. The regional community benefits from 2 venues offering different, complimentary experiences. Members save money through combined membership that allows for visits to both venues.

We learned that good staff is essential. Acculturation of staff and boards was achieved by transferring members between the 2 venues. We learned that careful planning; constant communication and feedback; and attention to detail are key to combining administrative functions. Although this affiliation has had its costs, in the next 3-5 years, we expect to see cost benefits and greater economies of scale from these efforts.

Model

The collaboration provides a model for regional urban development: NAIB helped transform Baltimore's blighted Inner Harbor into a world-recognized center of cultural and tourism activities, and serves as a national and international model for urban development. Through this affiliation and creation of the National Aquarium Institute, NAIB and NADC used their respective strengths to improve, strengthen, and establish a regional organization that reaches a broader audience through singular conservation messaging. In the future, this regional organization will serve as a platform for the Institute to address global aquatic conservation issues.

Efficiencies Achieved

With the formation of the National Aquarium Institute (NAI), the Board and staff developed a new, ongoing strategic planning process to guide integrating the activities of the NAIB and NADC into a cohesive unit. This plan allows the NAI to stay on schedule and to track changes as the two organizations combine resources and activities. The ultimate goal is to transform two aquariums from successful attractions with conservation as the primary message to a nationally recognized and respected conservation Institute that uses its attractions to advance the message of the importance of aquatic conservation. The senior management team is working together to implement five strategic priorities at the operational and tactical levels. These priorities are:

1. Become a global voice for conservation.
2. Provide transforming experiences that result in conservation behaviors.
3. Acquire and build interactive technologies.
4. Align the National Aquarium across and within the Affiliates.
5. Implement sustainable financial future guidelines.

Specific activities for 2010-2012 were approved by the Executive Committee earlier in 2010. Activities for Priority 4, which most directly relates to the collaboration, include completing, by the end of 2010, a multi-year action plan to make changes to the structure, composition, and processes of the Institute Boards based on research and recommendations by the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations (MANO). Also on the recommendation of MANO, we are engaging senior management in team-building and working to clarify roles and responsibilities in the decision-making process. We are re-establishing the annual planning cycle to align with annual budget development and including Board and staff in this process. By late 2010, we will publish a strategic plan document that includes the NAI's vision, mission, values, affiliate charters, strategic priorities, and a summary of the ten-year financial plan. We will update this plan annually. Guiding the process going forward will be a new Executive Director to be named in early 2011. He/she will replace the current Executive Director, who is retiring after 30 years of service with NAIB, 15 as the venue's Executive Director.

Combining the Baltimore and DC aquariums to create the NAI results in greater efficiency and effectiveness through the integration of "back office" activities such as human resources, finance and accounting, information technology,

marketing, central reservations, fundraising, and marketing. Individual and family memberships now include admission to both venues. Staff share expertise across both organizations, including animal health, life support, and exhibit design. Cost savings were achieved during the renovation of NADC by using in-house staff for planning, design, and fabrication of the upgrades and a new gift shop, which helps increase earned revenue. Several staff members now work at both locations and others, mainly animal care and exhibits and design staff, travel between the two venues as needed. By integrating resources, we did not need to hire additional staff. Although this affiliation has had its costs, in the next 3-5 years, we expect to see cost benefits and greater economies of scale from these efforts.

This collaboration creates a landmark opportunity, bringing together the historic perspective and prime site of NADC and the sizable facilities and world-class reputation of NAIB for the benefit of visitors to both locations. Our market studies have documented that Washington and Baltimore are two distinct markets, but our alliance gives us the opportunity to coordinate our programming and create complementary exhibits to bring out the best in both locations. NAIB takes visitors on a tour of aquatic environments from around the world, including coral reefs, rainforests, and Northern Australia. The more intimate NADC experience focuses on America's Aquatic Treasures – the National Marine Sanctuaries. Both venues offer activities to enhance visitor experiences, such as programs for school children, educational activities, animal feeding programs, and community events. We reach the broader community through educational programs that visit schools, workshops for teachers to help them present aquatic science topics, and conservation activities that allow the public to become actively involved in environmental stewardship. Staff is working to develop education and conservation initiatives that use both venues to reach a larger, more widespread audience than either venue can on its own.

The community is now seeing the benefits of the collaboration. Because of team efforts, both venues have expanded the programs offered to the community, such as offering a wider range of cultural heritage and community events at each venue. With support from federal grants made possible by this collaboration, NADC was able to renovate its greatly deteriorated space and update aging exhibits. Much of this work was done with the expertise of staff from NAIB, including animal care, life support, and exhibits and design staff. NADC was named the 2008 "Best Downtown Experience" by the Washington, DC Business Improvement District in recognition of these renovations and received a great deal of positive press in the local media.

The collaboration also put NAI in a position to negotiate an expanded and improved location for the DC venue. In 2014, the facility will move to a larger space at the south end of the Herbert C. Hoover Building of the U.S. Department of Commerce, where NADC has been located for 75 years. The facility will double in size to 32,000 square feet and have its entrance on the Constitution Avenue side of the National Mall, allowing for clear and easy visitor access. The new space will allow for vastly expanded educational and meeting capabilities.

The "social good" that inspired the collaboration and the formation of the NAI is expressed in our mission to inspire people to enjoy, respect, and protect the aquatic world. Our oceans and the entire aquatic world are in crisis. The oceans cover 70% of the Earth's surface and support the life of nearly 50% of all species on Earth. According to a study published in Science, less than 4% of the oceans remain unaffected by human activity – overfishing, habitat loss, marine debris, and commercial aquaculture, along with climate change and the related acidification are all contributing to the declining health of the oceans and other aquatic environments. Through our two venues and our programs, we strive to educate people about the importance, and not just the beauty, of aquatic environments and help them learn ways they can help protect and sustain aquatic life. Through our conservation programs, we are actively working to protect aquatic animals and habitats in the Chesapeake Bay, where we guide citizen-based restoration activities, the Bahamas where we are working to preserve coral reefs, and Costa Rica, where we are helping to protect endangered leatherback sea turtles. Our Marine Animal Rescue Program rescues, rehabilitates, and, whenever possible, releases animals that strand on Maryland's coast.

By collaborating to form the NAI, the NAIB and NADC have made possible a new affiliate, the National Aquarium Conservation Center (NACC). Formally launched in September 2010, this new research arm will take the National Aquarium Institute to the next level to become a global voice for conservation. Building on existing programs, partnerships, and the expertise of highly trained animal care and conservation staff at the Baltimore and Washington facilities, the NACC combines research, education, field work, and advocacy to advance the NAI's crucial aquatic conservation goals. The creation of this pivotal Conservation Center represents a significant commitment to expanding the National Aquarium's emphasis on aquatic conservation.

Evolution

Over a 20-year period, NADC regularly consulted with NAIB on animal care and life support issues. Discussions to combine resources occurred regularly throughout this period. Many board and staff at NAIB saw a natural linkage because of the geographic proximity of the two aquariums in a metropolitan area that has many interconnections. Some of the benefits of the alliance included NAIB gaining access to DC public and private sector funders along with better access to federal agencies while NADC would gain access to NAIB's expertise to upgrade its facility and improve programming for DC school children. The timing was especially beneficial because NAIB was at the beginning stages of a visioning process to expand the reach of its message of aquatic conservation and NADC was ready to become more of a presence in the community. In 2003, NADC leadership accepted NAIB's proposal of a formal affiliation. The Boards of the two organizations then worked together to develop a management structure. With legal guidance, they reviewed various models including alignment, merger, and holding company. The result was an umbrella organization, the National Aquarium Institute, created in 2005. The primary responsibility of the NAI is to champion the vision, determine long-term strategic direction, and oversee the financial health of the overall enterprise.

Each venue continues to have its own Board, with all members from both Boards serving on the Institute Board. This structure allows for strengthening and aligning the organization with its vision of becoming a global voice in aquatic conservation issues. NAIB, as the larger venue, provides human resources, finance and accounting, information technology, marketing, central reservations, and fundraising expertise. As an AZA-accredited institution, NAIB also provides knowledgeable animal health, life support, and exhibit design staff. Several NAIB staff members transferred to NADC to enhance animal care and life support. NADC, through its Executive Director and proximity to the federal government, provides access to federal agencies and national conservation organizations.

This structure contributes to the success of the collaboration by combining the strengths of two separate organizations into a single, more efficient and effective organization. The management structure allows for joint visioning, planning, and financial oversight while also allowing for autonomy in day-to-day operations. Moreover, it establishes a strategic location in the Nation's capital for the NAI that advances the long-term vision of global leadership in aquatic conservation and education, allowing the NAI to strengthen and expand partnerships, program support, opportunities for funding, and influence that the two aquariums could not achieve individually. Going forward, the NAI is now positioned to advance toward the goal of becoming a global voice for conservation through the recently established NACC.

At the time of the collaboration, the two organizations faced, and met, the challenges posed by the construction of a 65,000 sq. ft. addition at NAIB and the immediate need for upgrades to the aging exhibits and life support systems at NADC. Staff at both organizations worked together to balance their workloads and complete these two projects. This had the positive result of familiarizing staff with both venues and each other, developing the constructive working relationships needed to integrate resources and develop new, joint programs. An unexpected, and very positive, result of the collaboration is the increased opportunity for informal staff learning as staff become familiar with animals and exhibits at the sister venue. An increase in staff morale is also a benefit – staff at both venues is very dedicated to protecting and preserving aquatic environments and this collaboration expands the reach of our mission. With a presence on the Mall in DC, the NAI has a broader reach to national and international visitors.

Outcomes and benefits are measured by comparing how the two venues functioned separately and how they function now. NADC, with its newly refurbished and re-themed exhibits, rapidly moved to a higher level of operation in areas of animal health, life support systems, water quality control, and exhibit design, benefiting from the NAIB's 30 years of experience and success. NADC's aging exhibits were in such deteriorated condition, that the collaboration may have even prevented closure of the facility. Since the collaboration, the number of school children visiting NADC more than doubled. We are now working to expand the reach of NAIB's nationally recognized, award-winning educational programs to benefit children in DC.

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