

**Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation
Mystic Aquarium – Institute for Exploration – Immersion Learning**

Testimony Before the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature

**H.B. No. 5018, AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES AND REVENUES
FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2011.**

February 17, 2010

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, Senator Debicella, Representative Miner and members of the Appropriations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation, which operates Mystic Aquarium, Institute for Exploration and Immersion Learning. We are here to respectfully request restoration of funding for both institutions to Fiscal Year 2010 appropriated levels of \$570,000 and \$665,000 respectively.

Jointly, these institutions play a unique role in the state and serve as engines of the Connecticut tourism economy. Together, they are the primary providers of essential science education to every school district in the state, and serve as the state's primary sentinels in protecting our most precious natural and economic resource, Long Island Sound, and the animals that are essential to its vitality.

Connecticut's two aquariums attract and inspire over 1.225 million people every year by engaging them in consideration of life forms and ocean environments that cannot otherwise be observed by most people. These visits bolster local, regional and state economic activity. In fact, the two institutions contribute \$114 million directly to the Connecticut economy. In addition, people come to aquariums for respite in times of duress, making these two institutions even more vital to the quality of life in Connecticut in difficult economic times like these.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation in Mystic are the primary economic engines for Connecticut's tourism industry. Over 60% of Mystic Aquarium's visitors and almost 40% of The Maritime Aquarium's visitors are from out-state, which means that these visitors stay overnight, eat at restaurants, shop in local stores and buy gasoline in Connecticut, all major contributions to Connecticut state revenue. In addition to the \$114 million in economic impact they generate, more than 1,730 jobs are directly dependent upon both institutions.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation collaborate regularly on animal care, rescue and rehabilitation of animals and most particularly on education programs related to Long Island Sound. Together, we serve over 300,000 school children in the State of Connecticut, in every inner city and in nearly every school district.

Our education programs go directly into K-12 schools with hands-on learning activities correlated to the state's curriculum frameworks, live animals that inspire kids, after-school programs throughout the state, and numerous on-site programs at each institution that link students with scientists. We frequently bring kids out on Connecticut's rivers, shores and waterways and to study in the State's most remarkable classroom, Long Island Sound.

How important is this kind of educational programming to Connecticut? A report released by the National Research Council states that informal science education, exhibits, animals and activities of the sort provided by our two organizations, are critical to the learning experience of children. As paraphrased by the National Academies of Science, "...experiences in informal settings can significantly improve science learning outcomes for individuals from groups which are historically underrepresented in science, such as women and minorities. Evaluations of these programs suggest that they also support academic gains for children and youth in these groups."

In fact, evaluations of educational programs at both institutions show that our marine oriented science programs are helping Connecticut school children show significant academic gains, encouraging career exploration in the sciences, and contributing to long-term impact on science literacy and concern for the environment.

Both institutions play a critical role in the protection of Long Island Sound. Mystic Aquarium is involved in rescuing and rehabilitating marine mammals, birds and other sea creatures, leading this effort not only in Long Island Sound but throughout New England. At Mystic Aquarium, a major research laboratory studies the health of marine mammals and is involved in exploring the correlation between marine animal health and human health issues. In Norwalk, The Maritime Aquarium's permanent exhibits focus exclusively on Long Island Sound. A long-term data monitoring project with several partners has been studying changes to the biodiversity of Long Island Sound. The Maritime Aquarium plays a leading role in the regional harbor seal census and participates actively in horseshoe crab monitoring. Both institutions sponsor public programming to engage people in cleaning, protecting and caring for Long Island Sound.

Over the past decade, both institutions have branched out to look for new revenue opportunities. The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk has an IMAX theater that attracts many repeat visitors. Sea Research Foundation opened "Challenge of the Deep", a museum hall dedicated to the work of resident explorer, Dr. Robert Ballard. Sea Research also launched a

national distance learning program earning licensing fees from other aquariums and museums. Both institutions have added fee -based programs and amenities, promoted catering as a revenue source, and improved gift shop operations.

Exhibits and facilities in Aquariums are complex. Maintaining living creatures under water requires expertise in life support systems and continuous operation of pumps, filtration systems and other complex entities. The care of animals, including endangered or threatened species, must always be of primary concern. Most recently, both institutions cut expenses dramatically. Staffs were reduced by approximately 20% at Mystic and 29% at the Maritime, travel was curtailed, and maintenance at both institutions has been frozen. However, the unique nature of the facilities and mission, and the need to care for animals around the clock, limits the extent to which cost cutting can be achieved. We cannot shut down exhibits because they are *living* exhibits, nor can we easily transfer animals to other institutions because of regulatory restrictions.

Aquariums are special and unique enterprises. They are a rare type of institution, with only about 15 such institutions in the United States, precisely because of their complexity. Frequently, Aquariums are built and supported by governmental entities in the United States as powerful engines for the redevelopment of local and regional economies. In fact, The Maritime Aquarium was built expressly to anchor redevelopment in South Norwalk, a very successful endeavor that has transformed a formerly blighted neighborhood and attracted \$315 million in private development funds.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Sea Research Foundation in Mystic are essential economic engines for Connecticut. Other communities and states will look to build these kinds of institutions to spur economic development in a down economy; we are seeking sustained, reliable state support so that we can continue to drive economic activity. The requested investment in these two institutions is critical. It is no small matter that both institutions are seeing other previously reliable sources of revenue eliminated.

We do not envy the task ahead of you, and we appreciate that the resources available to the State are not as plentiful as they once were. However, over the last several years, we, among many others, have seen our level of appropriation be reduced in order to be part of the solution to these budget problems. We are grateful for the continued State support, even though it may be less, and we have responded accordingly making certain changes within our own operations and infrastructure to address adequately the budget predicament. As mentioned, each institution has reduced its workforce and trimmed other operating expenses in order to manage these fiscal challenges but we have done so in such a way to ensure that we remain viable, competitive and attractive. At this point, we have exhausted these internal remedies, and our concern is that, with continued erosion of this critical State support,

especially at the suggested 40% decrease, the ability to remain viable, competitive and attractive may be compromised.

The requested investment of \$570,000 for The Maritime Aquarium and \$665,000 for Sea Research Foundation in Mystic will bring a demonstrated 80% return to the State of Connecticut in direct economic impact and continue to pay dividends in demonstrated improvement in the academic performance of Connecticut's school children. Both institutions are committed to using state funds to drive economic development; for advertising and marketing aimed at attracting tourism, and for support of educational programs benefiting nearly every child in Connecticut.

These are difficult decisions – we merely ask that you consider these circumstances as you deliberate the Governor's budget proposal and develop your own over the course of the next several weeks. This economy will improve and it is our desire, as well as the State's desire, to be as strong as we were when we emerge from these challenging times.

Thank you for your attention.