

THINGS TO DO

In the Curator's Words: Birch Aquarium dives deep in the waters with 'Meditation Ocean'

"Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base," curated by artist and diver Hope Ginsburg, is on display at Birch Aquarium through February



The installation "M.O. Aquarius Reef Base" immerses guests in scenes filmed at the underwater research platform in "Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base" at Birch Aquarium. (Jordann Tomasek / Birch Aquarium at Scripps)

By **MICHAEL JAMES ROCHA** | michael.rocha@sduiontribune.com |

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In the Curator's Words is an occasional series that takes a critical look at ✕
current exhibitions through the eyes of curators.

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"Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base," a new exhibit at Birch Aquarium at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego, explores that concept.

Megan Dickerson, director of exhibits at Birch Aquarium, talks about the exhibit, which opened Nov. 20 and is on display through Feb. 22.





Q: Tell us more about the “meditation” concept tied to this exhibit.

A: A meditator might focus on “the breath,” something usually invisible yet deeply felt in the body. In scuba diving, divers breathe from a finite air supply that allows them to exist in a world humans weren’t built for. Beneath the surface, the invisible becomes visible as streams of bubbles rise toward the light. Breathing can even physically move you: a breath in, you ascend. A breath out, you sink.

“Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base” begins here, with breath as both a physical and metaphorical link between humans and the ocean. In the exhibition, we’re connecting to the growing understanding that being immersed in natural environments can enhance empathy, awareness and wellbeing. Soon-to-be-published studies suggest this is especially true for aquanauts, who spend extended time — sometimes as long as a month — living underwater. Their reports describe feelings of calm, interconnection and perspective similar to the “overview effect” that astronauts experience when seeing Earth from space.

In both cases, stepping outside ordinary human boundaries, whether into orbit or beneath the sea, can bring us a renewed sense of belonging with other beings on the planet. “Meditation Ocean” invites visitors to share in that feeling of presence and interconnection through sound, video and reflection.



Step into “Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base” at Birch Aquarium through a recreation of the underwater base’s iconic porthole. (Jordann Tomasek / Birch Aquarium at Scripps)

Q: How did this exhibition come to be?

A: Artist Hope Ginsburg is both a meditator and a diver. Through her collaborative Meditation Ocean Constellation, she weaves these practices together with artists, scientists and other practitioners. In work I first encountered at the Wexner Center, Hope and her team filmed divers meditating at their research sites, especially in the Florida Keys, where the effects of ocean warming on coral reefs are heartbreakingly clear.

Having worked at Scripps Oceanography, sometimes alongside coral scientists watching their life’s work change before their eyes, I recognized that feeling of what Donna Haraway calls “staying with the trouble.” It’s become a kind of mantra for me: yes, things are bad, and still — stay with the breath, stay with the trouble.

I reached out to Hope this spring to see if she might want to collaborate. She had just completed dives and documentation with the Meditation Ocean Constellation at Aquarius Reef Base, the world’s only undersea research habitat. Since 1993, Aquarius has rested 63 feet below Florida’s Conch Reef, hosting hundreds of missions. Though no research missions have taken place

Q: This is an unusual exhibition in that it was filmed underwater. What was the most challenging part of gathering materials for this show?

A: To capture their incredible footage of nurse sharks, cup corals and Caribbean octopuses — alongside human animals, the aquanauts — took the Meditation Ocean Constellation about five years of planning and lots of permitting. Aquarius Reef Base is in a research-only area of a marine sanctuary, and everything had to be planned down to the moment.

In the exhibition, you'll also hear fascinating interviews with the staff, aquanauts and divers who have made every Aquarius Reef mission possible. One of my favorite stories is about how the aquanauts get to know specific animal residents of the reef, like an Atlantic Goliath Grouper with a distinctive mark that's been named "Sylvia" after regular Aquarius aquanaut Sylvia Earle.

After working at Aquarius for decades, many of the aquanauts think of the animals who live there not as specimens or "others," but rather as neighbors and unique fellow beings.



Learn more about the science of saturation diving and the history of underwater research platforms in "Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base" at Birch Aquarium. (Jordann Tomasek / Birch Aquarium at Scripps)

Q: This is a unique reframing of the underwater narrative — as a meditation space. What other programming are you doing to bring the

A: While the exhibition centers on meditation in nature and the awe of undersea life, we also wanted to answer some of the practical questions that come up when you talk about living underwater: What do you eat? Where's the bathroom? To that end, we've added a few interpretive exhibits.

One explores the history of undersea habitats, which peaked in the 1960s and '70s. This year marks the 60th anniversary of San Diego's own SEALAB II, where astronaut Scott Carpenter, Navy staff and Scripps Oceanography researchers spent nearly a month living underwater just three-quarters of a mile from Scripps Pier. You'll see challenge coins and a few artifacts from that audacious project.

Another installation simulates the interior of Aquarius Reef Base, complete with bunks, galley tables and stories from Scripps Oceanography researchers like Dale Stokes and Jim Leichter, who've completed multiple missions there. (My favorite involves the "poop gnome," but you'll have to visit the show to hear it.)

There's a Zen saying: "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water." Learning about the everyday logistics of life underwater feels a bit like that. Researchers go to Aquarius to collect data, but in the process encounter moments of the sublime — like Dale Stokes' story of witnessing a sudden wave of bioluminescence glowing through the dark.

Or, as another famous meditator, Ram Dass, said, "we're all just walking each other home." Hope Ginsburg's "Meditation Ocean" body of work extends that idea beyond our human kin to the billions of other beings we share this planet with. In the end, we're all walking each other home.



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Birch Aquarium presents “Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base”

When: Through Feb. 22, 2026

Where: Birch Aquarium at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego, 2300 Expedition Way, La Jolla

Admission: \$24.95 to \$39.95

Phone: 858-534-3474

Online: aquarium.ucsd.edu

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