



Press Release

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Birch Aquarium Welcomes New COO, Charles Hopper

The former senior manager of business operations for the Seattle Aquarium will help lead Birch Aquarium into the future.

La Jolla, CA (March 8, 2021)—On the heels of its long-awaited reopening last week, Birch Aquarium at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego today announced that it has appointed a new Chief Operating Officer. Charles Hopper replaces Kathy Kiaunis who retired in December after nearly 6 years in the position.

Hopper comes to Birch Aquarium from the Seattle Aquarium, where he served for 15-years, most recently in the role of senior manager of business operations, a position that was developed exclusively for him.

“Charles brings a new level of experience, enthusiasm, and humanity to Birch Aquarium and is the ideal candidate to lead us through our recovery. I am looking forward to welcoming Charles to the Birch, Scripps Oceanography and larger UC San Diego team,” said Executive Director Harry Helling.

“In his first year, Hopper will be charged with rebuilding operational support for the aquarium to be able to deliver on its mission of ‘we connect understanding to protecting our ocean planet,’” Helling continued.

Prior to Birch Aquarium’s initial closure on March 12, 2020, the aquarium was poised to break its all-time attendance record. Now, having been open only a handful of weeks in the past year, Birch Aquarium faces a time of unprecedented challenge.

“I am looking forward to leading Birch Aquarium through this challenging time,” said Hopper. “Organizations across the globe are dealing with their version of recovery and we are fortunate in the fact that we have a passionate, knowledgeable and dedicated team at Birch Aquarium. We also have the unwavering support of Scripps (a world class institution) and UC San Diego. In that way we are unique and I believe poised well to embark on the challenges ahead.”

At Seattle Aquarium, Hopper was responsible for the guest experience, managing relationships with aquarium partners to include concessions for food and beverage, events management, merchandise, photos, VR and ticketing, as well as growing additional revenue.

He was also responsible for leading organization-wide development of a strategic plan for diversity, equity and inclusion.

“My approach to organizational growth is in a servant capacity, assisting stakeholders and partners to align their vision and aspirations in a way that is holistic. Allowing unique and diverse perspectives to be brought to the conversation in an equitable and inclusive manner.” Hopper said. “This better serves the mission and vision of the organization because it often yields fresh and bold ideas. In short it is simply listening to understand.

In addition to his work at Seattle Aquarium, Hopper serves on two Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) committees (Professional Development and Business Operations), has participated in the AZA Conservation Culture Task Force, and now works on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives within the AZA industry. Charles also serves as an instructor for the AZA's *Managing for Success* series.

Charles is a U.S. Armed Forces veteran whose honorable service includes top honors as Dorm Chief, Flight Leader, Airman of the month, and a selection to the elite and prestigious Air Force Honor Guard. He is a lifelong learner who holds an A.A. in audio engineering from the Art Institute of Seattle (reflecting his passion for and successes in music production, which led to him earning rights as a voting member for the Grammy awards), and a B.A. in finance and MBA from Seattle Pacific University. He and his wife Aisha have three children: Zaniya, Nathaniel and Jordan, and they will be relocating to San Diego this spring.

Birch Aquarium reopened outdoors-only on Saturday, February 27. For more information, visit aquarium.ucsd.edu.

About Birch Aquarium at Scripps

Birch Aquarium at Scripps is the public exploration center for Scripps Oceanography. Perched on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, Birch Aquarium features the groundbreaking work of Scripps Oceanography and UC San Diego scientists as well as conservation breeding programs, and interactive exhibits. Birch Aquarium’s mission is to connect understanding to protecting our ocean planet, which the aquarium achieves by engaging, hands-on learning opportunities for nearly 500,000 guests as well as more than 50,000 pre-K-12 students each year. Birch Aquarium also offers a variety of [virtual events and activities](#).

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