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15 Minutes With . . . The Aquarium's Jerry Schubel



Jerry Schubel is the president and CEO of the Aquarium of the Pacific.
(Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

Throughout 2011, the Business Journal plans to interview a diverse group of individuals in a new forum we call “15 Minutes With . . .”

We begin with an individual who most in Long Beach know as the leader of the city's world class Aquarium of the Pacific, Dr. Jerry Schubel. What locals may not know is that he is recognized nationally and internationally as one of the foremost authorities on marine science, who has published more than 225 scientific papers and is the author or editor of several books. A primary focus during his career has been on identifying and evaluating alternatives for solving major environmental problems of the coastal ocean. He has served on a significant number of local, regional, state, national and international committees and panels. In 2004, Schubel was selected as a national associate of the National Academies – advisors to the nation on science, engineering and medicine.

Schubel sat down with Staff Writer Tiffany Rider to discuss the Aquarium, its role in the community and future plans for the facility.

LBBJ: What brought you to the Aquarium in 2002?

Schubel: What brought me here was the opportunity to help create a world-class, distinctive aquarium that would be different from all others, and the people on the board who recruited me con-

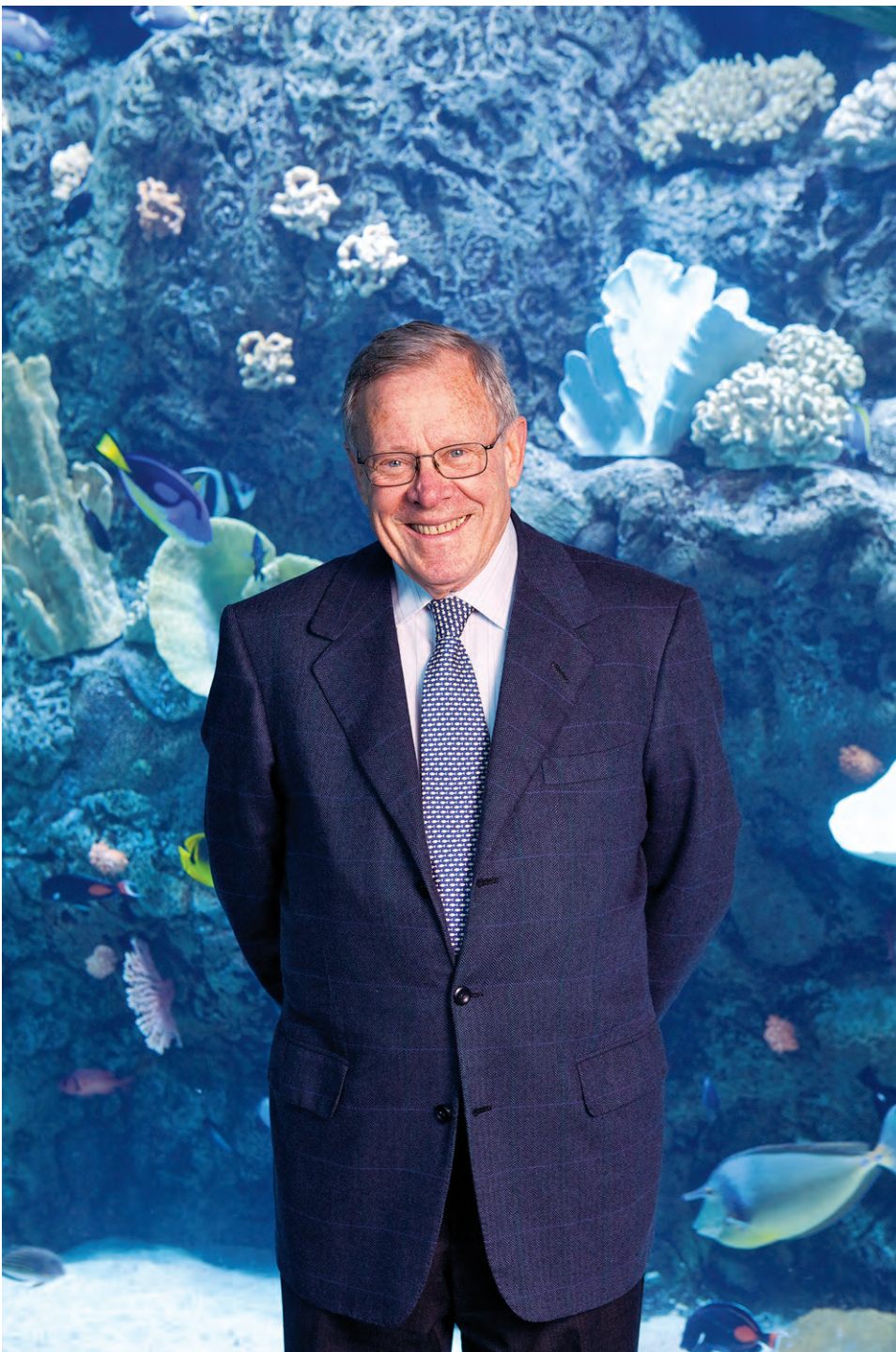
vinced me that they really wanted to do this. It had to be a great traditional aquarium at the core, but, as one of them said, it has to be more than a fish tank.

The idea was to surround it, wrap it in programs that connect people to nature and to all of the big issues of how humans are affecting nature. I was convinced that we had a board that wanted to do that and that this was the ideal city in which to do it. After eight and a half years, I'm more convinced than ever this is something that needs to happen, and it needs to happen here in Long Beach.

LBBJ: Is the city doing enough to promote sustainability and be a sustainable city?

Schubel: No. For one, a city or institution never does enough. I think that we are striving to do it in Long Beach with the progress we've made in making it bike friendly, pedestrian friendly. Those are good. We have a wonderful water department that has set a standard for water conservation long before others put an emphasis on it. The Long Beach Transit is also great.

But sustainability is not a destination you arrive at. It's very elusive, and the challenge is to always be pursuing it. I think as a city we are doing that. We had a forum here in the fall called “Stumbling Toward Sustainability,” because that's exactly what you have to do. It's not as if anyone could Google sustainability



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Jerry Schubel, President/CEO, Aquarium of the Pacific

and find out how to get there from where you are now. It's more like the drunkard's walk in statistics. It's the same thing with our Aquarium. We've won all kinds of awards. We've increased our attendance by 50 percent without increasing our energy off the grid. We reduced water by 50 percent. But we're still figuring out other ways to be sustainable. It's a journey, not a destination.

LBBJ: How does attendance look for 2011?

Schubel: I would say that this past year our attendance was down about 5 percent. So that broke our record. We had seven consecutive years of attendance increases. Given the economy, we were down a little bit less than 5 percent. We ended the year at

1.44 million, but we ended in a strong position financially and, programmatically, we're a better institution than we were a year ago. Given new exhibits and new programs that we have, I think that we will end 2011 above 1.5 million. We're going to start that streak again of consecutive years of increase. We're like the Connecticut women's basketball team. They lost after 89 wins or whatever the number was when Stanford beat them. Now they're starting a new streak. So I'm very optimistic in 2011.

LBBJ: How does the Aquarium's visitation numbers compare with other aquariums?

Schubel: You can compare them on a number of things. You can compare them on the number of people who go, and in terms of visitation we're the fourth largest in the nation. We're in a strong fourth position.

LBBJ: How many Aquariums are there in the nation? Do you know?

Schubel: Something like 30 that are stand-alone, large aquariums. We're in a strong position. Right now, if you normalize the attendance for the area that we have available for people inside the Aquarium, I think we have the densest attendance than any other aquarium. It's certainly much smaller physically than the Georgia aquarium or the aquarium in Monterey, and that's one of the reasons we have to expand.

LBBJ: Do you consider the Aquarium a destination for visitors?

Schubel: Yes. A destination means to me that it's a predetermined endpoint to a journey. When you look at our aquarium, only about 10 percent of the 1.44 million people come from Long Beach. So people throughout Southern California make a decision to come to this aquarium. So, by all means, we are a destination and we are the largest cultural destination in this city by far.

LBBJ: Is Long Beach doing enough to attract visitors?

Schubel: No. I think we do a better job attracting conventions than we do visitors and tourists. I think it's important for us as

a city to do a better job of getting people to come and stay for a day and to stay overnight. That means we have to be much more creative in the ways that we bundle experiences, attractions and activities, and we do it thematically. No matter how big and how popular we get, you can't spend a day in this place. You get aquarium fatigue. You can only look at so many fish. So we have to bundle it. That's why we're trying to promote this city as the heart of what we call the urban ocean. This is an amazing piece of the ocean that we are on and we think if we can bundle it, we can get a lot of people to come to our city. They would come to the Aquarium. They might take a whale-watching cruise. They might

take an ocean cruise. They might learn about the port, the various uses that we make of our ocean, how we share it with animals.

LBBJ: We haven't heard too much about bundling attractions like that.

Schubel: We haven't done it very well. I think it's better if it's done thematically. I think we could do better.

LBBJ: Have you talked to anybody about doing that?

Schubel: Just you.

LBBJ: How do you think the new galleries and exhibits opening in 2011 may affect Aquarium visitation?

Schubel: It will help us get back to increasing our attendance. I think, just as important, they deepen and enrich the experience for the people who come. We will have a new exhibit on "Poles in Peril," which talks about climate change, how climate is affecting the poles first and how those changes at the poles will cascade around the globe. It will affect the birds that migrate to our salt marshes in the Long Beach area – Los Cerritos and so on. Then we're going to have another exhibit on how climate change will affect California's water system. That's done in collaboration with the state department of water resources. Then, of course, we'll open the portion of our science center, the Science on a Sphere facility, which is a wonderful way to experience and learn about large-scale phenomena. I think we will have a strong year. I'd be very disappointed if we don't get north of 1.5 million visitors.

LBBJ: One of the Aquarium's missions is to be a steward in education. How does the Aquarium support the local science community?

Schubel: Let me back into that. I see our primary mission as conservation. The vehicle by which we do conservation is to try to help people who come to be more aware of issues and be better stewards. Education is our vehicle. Our exhibits are educational tools and so on. Now, the other part of what we try to do is stimulate interest in science. If you look at where this nation stands relative to other nations in science and technology, we are no longer the ones who lead the world. Somehow you have to excite kids about science so they will see it not as something that you have to achieve certain test scores on, but that it is exciting and it's fun. You're asking questions and exploring, you're stumbling and getting up. So we focus on young people, but we also use it as a platform for graduate students, for example.

We have one of the best lecture series in all of Southern California. We bring scientists, environmentalists and so on from around the world, and we get a lot of graduate students and undergraduates from local colleges and universities who come. They can actually get credit for attending our lectures. I think it's a combination of those. Then we have some programs where we try to help researchers be better at communicating their science to different audiences. So we try to do those things that what Jack Welch would have said we have an "unfair competitive advantage" at. We're not a research institution with a lot of research strength. We have different assets.

LBBJ: How do you envision the Aquarium 10 years from now?

Schubel: I think it will be the most distinctive aquarium in the world that will fulfill the dreams the board had nine years ago or so. Are you familiar with the 92nd Street Y in New York City?

LBBJ: No.

Schubel: It's an amazing place. It is a cultural and community center of New York City. One night you might go there to hear the

president of the United States speak. The next night it could be a local hero who could be a janitor, could be a conservationist, a policeman. It's the cultural heart of New York City and it's a gathering place. I see us being that kind of place, not only for Long Beach but also for Southern California, for everything related to the ocean, the environment and human relationships. We will have completed the front expansion and will use art, science, technology – every tool we can – to convey these important messages and connect people more than any place else. We use art now. . . . We will continue to use music and dance and art in conjunction with science. I expect then that our steady attendance will be somewhere north of 1.8 million a year. That would be limited only by capacity. I think it then can make Long Beach as a city into a destination. Great cities have great cultural organizations. I think this aquarium is Long Beach's best opportunity for a world-class cultural organization. That doesn't mean that other ones aren't good. But if you want to go world-class, this aquarium is much closer to it than any other institution in this city. I know the economy is tough, but I hope the city won't lose sight that their aquarium – because they own this – that they have the opportunity to create something quite distinctive that will draw people to this city.

LBBJ: Is there anything else that you would like to mention?

Schubel: In the eight and a half years that I've been here, it's been one of the most rewarding periods of my life. We have a great staff, a great board; it's in a great city. My wife and I have fallen in love with the Aquarium and the city and Southern California. There's such a wonderful opportunity here. We have to, as a city and as the Aquarium, seize it. I think in the next couple of years they're going to determine . . . we will always be a good aquarium. But if we make the right moves we can achieve something great. The city has to be involved. When I look at this city, we have a great port. There's no question about that. We are not a great port city. There are great port cities in the world like Rotterdam. They embrace the port, and people actually go to those cities partly to see the port. That's why we're doing this urban ocean. When I think of the greatest assets that we have, the port would be one of those. But we as a city are not really embracing them, I don't think, in the right way.

LBBJ: Can people sign up to tour the port whenever they want?

Schubel: They do summer tours. We have our urban ocean cruises. They're better, they're more balanced, and they talk not only about the port but how we share space with the port and whales and marine life and surfing and so on. You take the Southern California Bight, which is from Point Conception to the U.S./Mexican border; 175 miles long. If you look at the zone from the shoreline in, about 50 to 70 miles, we have 20 million people. That is larger than the population of any state in the country except Texas. It's half a million more people than in the State of New York. These people make diverse use of the ocean. The ocean is still in remarkably good shape. There are lots of lessons here, and we ought to be able to introduce people to how surfing can coexist with the ports. Recent data have shown that not only do we have all these ship tracks, but also in the entire Pacific Ocean more animals come in and out of the Southern California Bight than any other comparable area of the Pacific Ocean. So we share it with surfers and swimmers and with kayakers and with ships. It's an amazing place. That's why we ought to be able to figure out how to make this a destination. ■