

# Aquarium of Niagara welcomes endangered sea turtle, unveils exhibit

Submitted

The Aquarium of Niagara has a new ambassador: Squirt the sea turtle. He's the centerpiece of a new exhibit that features sea animals who've been rescued and are considered non-releasable.

Squirt is a Kemp's ridley sea turtle, the smallest and most endangered species of sea turtle.

The story of his survival is both inspirational and an example of a partnership between humans and animals in the wild. The Aquarium of Niagara staff is part of the team that saved Squirt and gave him a new home where he can thrive.

The sea turtle has permanent injuries that were caused by a boat propeller. The Aquarium staff is counting on Squirt to help educate guests about how human actions can both help and hurt wildlife.

For the exhibit unveiling Nov. 17, Aquarium President and CEO Gary Siddall welcomed officials from the city, county and state and energy company NOCO, all of whom helped sponsor Squirt's journey to a safe environment.

A press release said, "The Aquarium of Niagara is commit-



Squirt, a Kemp's ridley sea turtle, is the centerpiece of a new exhibit at the Aquarium of Niagara. He has permanent injuries caused by a boat propeller and is considered unreleasable and endangered. In his new home, Squirt will be a conservation ambassador to help educate guests about how human actions can both help and hurt wildlife. (Photo by Karen Carr Keefe)

ted to providing a forever home to non-releasable animals who would be unable to survive in their natural environments. Squirt joins the Aquarium's eight non-releasable marine mammals, as well as several surrendered and confiscated

animals whose stories highlight the challenges they faced in the wild."

Siddall said, "When guests make authentic connections with our animal ambassadors, they are more likely to care about those

animals' wild counterparts."

The invited guests and the press gave an enthusiastic round of applause, putting an exclamation point on Siddall's statement.

Squirt was found floating in the Peace River in Punta Gorda, Florida, in 2015. He had old wounds consistent with a boat strike. A veterinarian determined that "Squirt's jaw and left eye injuries left him unable to forage and eat live prey, and he would not likely survive if returned to his natural environment," the press release said.

The sea turtle spent eight years under the care of the Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota, until it was decided he should be transferred to a facility with a larger exhibit to meet his needs.

The Aquarium of Niagara had a 10,000-gallon exhibit available. It had previously been used for reef sharks that went to a new home at a New Jersey aquarium.

To prepare for Squirt's arrival, the Aquarium of Niagara completed a \$175,000 exhibit renovation. The Niagara Falls facility also underwent a rigorous inspection

process in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), which is entrusted to protect and recover the species.

The Aquarium's zoological staff worked hand-in-hand with biologists from the FWS and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to ensure that Squirt would have a safe, permanent new home.

Dignitaries were on hand to welcome Squirt and congratulate the Aquarium for its role in protecting endangered species and enhancing its place as a community treasure for families from Western New York and around the world.

Those who spoke at the event included New York State Sen. Rob Ort, Assemblyman Angelo Morinello, Niagara Falls Mayor Robert Restaino, NOCO Director of Sales and Energy Solutions Pierre Aubertin and Mo Sumbundu, representing Gov. Kathy Hochul. NOCO and the Niagara County Industrial Development Agency provided sponsorship to bring Squirt to the Aquarium.

Senior Contributing Writer Karen Carr Keefe contributed to this report.

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