

What's It Like

OPEN WIDE: IT'S FEEDING TIME AT THE ZOO

Blade writer dishes out dinner for sharks, Sticky the octopus

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, March 12, 2006

This is the third in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.

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Shark attacks were on the rise last year in the U.S., so I wasn't taking any chances.

There were cautionary signs, after all, as I approached the shark tank at the Toledo Zoo's aquarium during a morning I spent helping out.

The first thing I noticed was the plastic mesh that extended all the way to the ceiling from the 6,000-gallon tank, with its four shark inhabitants circling the depths.

"One of them's a jumper," explained aquarium keeper Angie Benner, a 13-year veteran of the zoo.

That would be the banded bamboo shark, a bottom feeder who has the unusual ability to survive for up to 12 hours out of the water.

He and his little snout can be a bit of a surprise, even to someone like Angie. She wasn't scared the first time she fed him - he's no man-eater - but it can be shocking when his head bursts through the water's surface and slides up the wall of the tank.

"I would kind of scream a little," she admitted.

Not me. It helped that Angie went through some worst-case scenarios with me after we pulled back the mesh and had access to the tank:

Me: What if I put my hand in there?

Angie: The sharks could definitely do some damage.

Me: What if I fell in?

Angie: They'd probably kill themselves by swimming away into the wall of the tank.

Uh, super. At least they'd be as scared as me.

Thus calmed, I grabbed some yellow rubber gloves (these hands weren't meant to touch squishy squid and smelly herring and other shark bait) and a nifty reacher (one of those sticks with a moveable claw at one end) and went to work.

Angie put together a pail of food for them from a tray of all kinds of goodies. I grabbed one of the items with my claw, held it suspended just below the water's surface, and waited.

Dun-dun. Dun-dun. Dun-dun dun dun ...

It didn't take long. The pair of blacktip reef sharks - sleek, 4-foot-long predators - were quick to surface for their twice-a-week meal. They liked it away from the side of the tank, where they could snatch their prey from my grasp - when I decided to let go. (It took a while for me to figure out that it helped to release the fish food, instead of



Sticky the octopus. (THE BLADE)

hanging on and playing tug-of-war with the sharks like you might a dog.)

The six-foot-long wobbegong shark, painted in a camouflage of brown and tans, got a large herring when he could be tempted up from the sandy bottom.

And the jumper, he was the toughest. He kept endlessly popping up with his mouth so close to the wall that I had trouble levering the fish into it. It wasn't scary so much as just plain weird.

There was some brief splashing at times, but it was completely safe with little other drama. And no shark attacks.

The sharks, of course, are a small part of the overall attraction. The aquarium has nearly 2,800 animals in 51 exhibits.

Behind the scenes is an unseen menagerie - new fish quarantined in tanks to make sure they are free of disease, back-ups sitting around just in case an animal on display dies, fish that are part of breeding programs.

There are translucent, ghostlike moon jellies (a type of jellyfish) that are fed tiny red crustaceans called cyclops with a turkey baster, and venomous scorpion fish that pounce on krill you offer them from the end of a piece of straw from a broom.

There are tanks that need to be cleaned, pallets of salt boxes (67 boxes needed to make 20,000 gallons of saltwater), and chillers to keep the water for certain organisms properly cool.

Like Sticky.

Sticky is a young giant Pacific octopus who arrived at the zoo around Christmas. She likes her water at about 50 degrees. She has a reddish-brown hue and eight tentacles that extend two feet each and have two rows of powerful suction cups used for grasping prey and tasting.

A brief word about the octopus: The octopus is cool. This is a scientific fact.

Sticky is so smart that you can put her food in a sealed jar and put that inside a plastic bin and she can still figure out how to get it. The aquarium keepers call that enrichment. I call it a neat party trick.

She is slimy on the outside, but - as her name suggests - incredibly sticky underneath. That's where all the suckers are. They are so strong that once she's stuck on you, it feels like there's no getting away unless she's OK with it.

So I spent minutes just standing there, letting Sticky's tentacles play over my hand, wrapping this way and that, as I fed her shrimp and squid with my other hand. It was an indescribably cool sensation.

Until Angie pointed out that my hand was slowly being drawn toward Sticky's mouth and reminded me that maybe that wasn't a good idea.

"I don't think it would hurt you, but you never know," she said.

That's not the kind of enrichment I had in mind.

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