

“Mystery Reef” Special Exhibit

Mote Marine Laboratory
Community Relations & Communications team
Exhibit Design & Fabrication team
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1. Nominee’s creative function within the overall organization

- The Aquarium Exhibits team is responsible for the design, fabrication and maintenance of all public-facing exhibits in Mote Aquarium. The Community Relations & Communications (CRC) team works closely with the Aquarium Exhibits team to provide concepts, content and occasional design support for the creation of aquarium exhibits, and are also responsible for developing creative marketing campaigns to promote special exhibits at the Aquarium. Together, these two teams collaborated to produce and promote Mystery Reef, a special limited-time exhibit at Mote Aquarium.

2. Why should this team be recognized? What do they do that is exceptional?

- Mote is opening a brand new aquarium, the Mote Science Education Aquarium (Mote SEA), in winter 2024. The Exhibits team (5 people) is responsible for the creation of almost every piece of signage in the new facility, and the content writers from the CRC team (2 people) are responsible for writing all of the content for those exhibits. They have been working around the clock for over a year to make Mote SEA a success.
- Despite having to keep that mammoth project progressing, both teams were also tasked with the responsibility of developing a special limited-time exhibit for Mote’s current aquarium that would serve the dual purposes of (1) educating our guests about Mote’s impressive coral restoration work and (2) driving attendance to the current aquarium before it closes at the end of 2024.
- Here is an overview of what the Mystery Reef Team was able to accomplish between September 2023 and March 2024:
 - Initial collaboration between the two departments and additional members of the broader Exhibits Committee produced the general theme of “Mystery Reef.” CRC writers Hayley Rutger and Emma McIntyre then crafted an entire narrative that turned the complex and sometimes abstract work of researching and countering threats to the coral reef ecosystem into a relatable and engaging experience for visitors, including a scavenger hunt for guests that could be completed by locating the clues sprinkled throughout the exhibit content. Their creative idea to establish “culprit” personas for each major threat facing coral reefs was then brought to life by the Exhibits team’s contracting Illustrator, Capucine Zelenko.

Then designers Sam Bledstein and Marissa Clayton, fabricator Greg Cottrell, and technicians Devin Gregg and Kath Loose worked together to physically build the world of Mystery Reef, including a variety of interactive activities that were cleverly adapted to convey the reality of — and Mote’s solutions to — coral reef decline. The CRC team provided a script to Video Services Manager Joe Nickelson that he used to produce an atmospheric video in which Mote’s President & CEO welcomes guests into the exhibit with an “official briefing”.

- Then the CRC team took over to conceptualize an engaging “Whodunnit” campaign that enticed target audiences to become a “coral detective” by visiting the exhibit and solving the mystery of “*Who is harming the reef?*”. CRC designer Kevin Toshner brilliantly applied the exhibit’s creative assets to lay out engaging ads and on-site promotional materials, while PR & Marketing Manager Kaitlyn Fusco, along with Communications Coordinators Sean Stover and Kathryn Gentile, hosted a media preview event and strategically marketed the exhibit opening on Mote’s social media channels.
- The exhibit opening was attended by over 1,000 visitors and covered by twelve different media stations. 88% of survey respondents reported that their children learned new information about coral science. One respondent shared that her family, “Loved the air maze, foam blocks, reading book, and bop-the-lionfish game. My 5 year-old really enjoyed the scavenger hunt and I liked that it helped challenge her with spelling!”
- In summary, the Mystery Reef Team conceptualized, designed, executed and successfully promoted a captivating, educational exhibit completely from scratch while also working toward the biggest deadline of their careers (the Mote SEA opening). We wish to recognize their incredible hard work, dedication, collaboration and creativity with this award.

3. Team age, history, or perspective if relevant

- The CRC and Exhibit teams have been working together to produce high-quality exhibits for the past 7+ years, but five of the key people involved in the Mystery Reef exhibit had been with Mote less than 6 months when the project started — another testament to the team’s ability to collaborate productively and effectively.

4. Previous recognition: i.e. internal and/or awards

- Members of the CRC team received two Hermes awards last year (though not for their writing or exhibit-related work).
- The Exhibits team has received verbal commendations from Mote’s leadership on a few occasions but has not yet received any formal awards for their incredible design and fabrication work.

5. Examples of work product

- Please see relevant materials here:
<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/nc5gvbelipuaasc7whjzg/h?rlkey=s51izs74bvsuy6ep8z4zxozu5&dl=0>