



PRESS RELEASE
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Sea Center Celebrates Underwater Parks Day with Free Admission for All

- Underwater Parks Day celebrating marine protected areas (MPAs) will take place Saturday, January 17, 2026.
- From 10:00 AM–3:00 PM the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History Sea Center on Stearns Wharf will be offering free admission to all.
- Guests will enjoy the Sea Center’s regular exhibits as well as ocean educators, conservation organizations, and community partner activities.
- MPAs play a pivotal role in maintaining balanced and resilient ocean ecosystems.

SANTA BARBARA, CA— The Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History Sea Center invites the community to celebrate Underwater Parks Day with a free, family-friendly event on Saturday, January 17, 2026. This annual tradition highlights marine protected areas (MPAs), otherwise known as “underwater parks,” that safeguard the biodiversity and abundance of ocean life along California’s coast.

Some of the most nutrient-rich waters on the planet are found in the Santa Barbara Channel and Channel Islands region. These waters support thriving kelp forests, tide pools, and rocky reef habitats that are protected through MPAs, which prevent overharvesting of marine resources to promote healthy ecosystems for future generations.

“Underwater Parks Day is a community celebration designed to bring awareness to the network of marine protected areas off the California coast,” said Sea Center Director Richard Smalldon. “These underwater parks play a vital role in preserving biodiversity by creating sanctuaries for marine life. Helping people understand their importance is central to our mission.”

According to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the California MPA network is “the largest ecologically connected network in the world”. While MPAs are doing the good work of protecting biodiversity all over the planet, California is clearly a leader.

Underwater Parks Day is one of two free days usually offered by the Sea Center each year. “By offering free admission, we hope to make the Sea Center accessible to all members of our community,” Smalldon said. “It’s also an opportunity for people to meet local partners and learn how they can get involved in ocean conservation.”

This year’s celebration will feature interactive booths and activities hosted by local community partners, including the Spotting Giant Sea Bass project, SB Channelkeeper, Heal the Ocean, Channel Island Naturalist Corps, Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, Blue Whales Blue Skies program, and the Caselle Lab at UCSB.



Through hands-on experiences and conversations with scientists and conservationists, visitors will learn how MPAs support ocean health and how they can play a role in protecting these special places. “We hope that by knowing these places exist and understanding the role they play, visitors will feel empowered to support local conservation efforts and become involved,” Smalldon added.

Guests are also encouraged to take their curiosity beyond the wharf and explore the Channel Islands and surrounding waters firsthand with local operators like Island Packers and the Condor Express. “Get out there and explore,” said Smalldon.

No reservations are required. For more information and a full schedule of upcoming events, please visit sbnature.org/calendar.

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About the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History Sea Center

Located on historic Stearns Wharf, this highly interactive regional aquarium and marine education facility offers guests close encounters with marine animals, and exploration of the Santa Barbara Channel on the Wet Deck. In addition to permanent exhibits, the Sea Center hosts unique events and special educational programming, including Underwater Parks Day and World Oceans Day.



Image 1: Volunteer with Channel Islands Naturalist Corps, Joe Morgan, educates a guest about whale ecology at Underwater Parks Day 2025.



Image 2: A group of guests get up close and personal with sea stars at the Sea Center.