

# Under the Sea

NEW SCIENCENTER EXHIBIT ALLOWS KIDS TO 'CONNECT TO THE OCEAN'

by Zac DesAutel



Bobby Lama, age 5, holds a chocolate chip starfish at the new Sciencenter exhibit.

**O**BVIOUSLY emboldened by President Bush's recent statement that enjoying science won't cast them as

with one another, and none of the animals pose a danger to anyone who handles them; the urchins naturally have blunt spikes and the crabs don't pinch. Still, for those who prefer to study specimens that will remain reassuringly quiescent, there are some corals as well.

But there's more to the exhibit than the touch tank; it includes other interactive elements as well and the whole new system is linked together — the same water cycles through all the exhibits (that's where the 350-gallon number comes from). There are display tanks to the left and right of the pool, and a touch-screen computer program called "Who calls a tide pool home?" that uses software supplied by the Monterey Bay Aquarium in San Francisco. The goal is to put the proper animals into the tide pool on the screen, while keeping the other animals and objects out.

The "Hang on!" exhibit allows visitors to simulate waves coming in and washing over the creatures in a tide pool. Another new interactive display tells visitors that "all drains lead to the ocean." Fortunately this one is a little bit less heartrending than *Finding Nemo* since it's tough to get very deeply attached, at an emotional level, to the little beads that demonstrate the principle here. Visitors can dump red and yellow bits of plastic down the "drain" of a hypothetical Ithaca home at the top of the display, and then watch the simulated drainage travel through creeks, swamps, lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway before ending up in the Atlantic Ocean. The Sciencenter has also started new programs in the adjacent amphitheater to complement the Connect to the Ocean exhibit.

The touch tank and surrounding displays cost about \$200,000 all-told, estimated Lara Kimber, the Sciencenter's director of advancement and a biologist who man-

aged the "Connect to the Ocean" project.

The Brooks Family Foundation made the initial \$50,000 donation. "Connect to the Ocean" is unique in that such salt-water touch tanks are usually located in coastal aquariums; this is the only exhibit of its kind in Upstate New York and Pennsylvania.

In addition to the visible displays, there's a closed-off sanctuary tank away from public access areas. There, the salty critters won't have to worry about being unexpectedly hoisted away from whatever they happen to be doing. Specimens will be rotated back and forth from the touch tank to the sanctuary in an attempt to keep them from undue stress.

Sciencenter officials, eager to make their venture into the life sciences a success, are mindful of the potential hypocrisy of using captured sea creatures to try to teach conservation and protection. To that end, the exhibit is populated only with specimens bred and raised in captivity.

That's also the reason for the limited hours that the touch tank will be open, at least initially — it's an effort to limit the amount of disturbance the animals have to endure.

After just an hour of the opening, fine silt had clouded much of the water in the system (which the filters eventually dealt with), prompting exhibits developer Tom Pendergrast to observe wistfully that "you just can't simulate 100 kids coming through here and getting their hands dirty."

*Connect to the Ocean opened to the public on Saturday. The touch tank's regular hours are from noon to 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, and from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays; the Sciencenter is located at 601 First St., right off of Route 13. Visit [www.sciencenter.org](http://www.sciencenter.org) for special presentation schedules and more information.*