



Sea Life Park's New Owners Make Their First Big Dolphin Decision

By Jeff Tucker and Rob Kvidt / September 19, 2026 / Hawaii Travel News / 8 Comments

Updated September 19, 2026. One of Oahu's oldest visitor attractions has a new owner. [Sea Life Park Hawaii](#) opened in 1963, and generations of Hawaii visitors have enjoyed watching the dolphins and sea lions. The park has been a place where visitors have stopped to remember the dolphins, sea lions, and the beautiful setting beneath the Koolau cliffs.



Hawaiian Council acquired the park from Herschend Family Entertainment on August 11 for an undisclosed amount, putting it under Native Hawaiian ownership for the very first time. For visitors with reservations or annual passes, nothing changes immediately. Existing bookings and passes remain valid, operations are continuing, and no layoffs are planned.

Hawaiian Council CEO Kuhio Lewis plans to bring more Native Hawaiian cultural storytelling, education, hands-on demonstrations, native landscaping, and Hawaiian retail into the park. Chef Roy Yamaguchi, whose recent Outrigger Kauai Beach Resort overhaul BOH covered firsthand, is now taking charge of Sea Life Park's food and beverage program, including plans for a new outdoor dining space.

Lewis has suggested that Sea Life Park needs to become more than an attraction centered primarily on animal performances. The question now is whether an attraction built for the Hawaii visitor of

the state, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration also spoke publicly about the future of its captive dolphins.

Sea Life Park isn't cheap to visit.

The economics are one place to start. [Current online admission](#) is \$49.99 for adults and \$39.99 for children ages 4 through 12. At the gate, those prices rise to \$59.99 and \$49.99, while parking adds another \$18 plus tax.

That puts two adults and two children at roughly \$200 just for admission and parking when tickets are purchased online, before anyone eats or buys anything. By contrast, Sea Life Park's basic adult annual pass currently costs \$59.99, the same price as a single full-price adult admission at the gate.

Animal encounters change the costs completely. A dry-land Dolphin Aloha experience is \$89.99 online and includes park admission. The Dolphin Encounter is \$229.99, while Dolphin Exploration is \$299.99, also including admission.

Reviews also suggest these encounters can change how visitors feel about the experience. Families with younger children frequently praise the dolphins, turtles, touch pools, employees, and beautiful setting, and some specifically like that Sea Life Park isn't enormous and can easily be experienced in a few hours. ✕

Reviews repeatedly describe the park as small, dated, and in need of renovation, and some question whether general admission delivers enough for the price. Recent Google reviews sharpen the picture, with visitors describing a park they can see in one or two hours, closed

Those are visitor observations rather than any independent findings about animal conditions, but the same themes appear across years and continue into 2026. Sea Life Park still offers memorable experiences, particularly for families buying an animal encounter, but at that cost, simply walking through the gate raises questions about value.

The dolphins are the exception. Even some visitors who criticize the rest of the park praise the dolphin show or paid encounters, and positive reviews often focus on those experiences. That leaves Hawaiian Council with the unusual challenge of offering visitors more reasons to come beyond the animal performances, while the animal experience most associated with Sea Life Park still appears to be its strongest draw for now.

Sea Life Park once drew far more visitors.

Sea Life Park's attendance history makes the ownership change even more interesting. Shortly after opening, historical reporting put attendance at about 800 paid visitors a day, and by 1966 annual attendance was projected to be 400,000. State records reflect Sea Life Park having 391,140 visits in 2017. That then Ad ends in 6dropped to 288,917 in 2018 and 265,665 in 2019. x

Then the pandemic shut Sea Life Park for nearly a year. Attendance fell to 41,392 in 2020, then rose to 125,000 in 2021 and 190,915 in 2022. Comparable Sea Life Park attendance figures haven't been published since then, as far as we could find.

changing attitudes toward captive marine mammals, high prices, an aging attraction, competition for limited vacation time, or simply a change in Hawaii visitor habits. What is clear is that Hawaiian Council is taking over Sea Life Park at a very different time than when it had nearly 400,000 annual visits.

Some of the worst online reviews come from people who remember Sea Life Park differently. Repeat visitors describe returning after one or more decades and finding fewer attractions, a smaller experience, and a park that no longer feels like the one they remember.

Sea Life Park's larger redevelopment never happened.

This wasn't the first vision for reinventing the aging Sea Life Park. Years before this sale, the previous operator developed plans for a roughly \$30 million redevelopment that included a green sea turtle conservation center, a volcano-themed shark exhibit, and restoration of part of the historic Kaupo fishing village.

The plan included changes to exhibits, entrances, walkways, parking and dining. The project received government review and approvals, but construction was postponed as the company recovered from pandemic losses.

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Former Sea Life Park general manager Valerie King said the previous operator upgraded the park's animal habitats, even though the remaining redevelopment did not go forward. And a \$30 million plan needs perspective. For a 62-year-old marine park with specialized animal facilities, visitor infrastructure, restaurants, exhibits, buildings and extensive grounds, it wasn't a wholesale redevelopment of Sea Life Park.



including minor repairs and upgrades, including replacing the pumping system serving the marine animals, structural repairs after damage from the March Kona-low storms, and new turf at the playground.

That's still a bare-bones initial investment in a substantial and aging marine park. A larger redevelopment plan is expected, although Hawaiian Council has not yet disclosed what it will include or whether parts of the previous \$30 million plan will go forward.

Hawaiian Council is taking on something very different.

Hawaiian Council has become increasingly involved in Hawaii's visitor industry through cultural tourism, visitor education, retail, luaus and other visitor-facing businesses. That experience helps explain many of the changes already being discussed for Sea Life Park.

But Sea Life Park isn't just another cultural attraction by any measure. It is a highly specialized and animal-care-intensive operation. We haven't seen evidence that Hawaiian Council previously operated any comparable animal facility. That doesn't mean they won't do a great job, and they have every opportunity to improve Sea Life Park. The park already comes with specialized people for animal care, and retaining that institutional knowledge will help provide continuity during the transition. Ad ends in 6 

Sea Life Park also brings existing accreditations into the ownership change. The park received accreditation from the International Marine Animal Trainers' Association in 2024, and it has long been affiliated with the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums.

Hawaiian Council has since named Christina M. Leos as Sea Life Park's new general manager. Leos previously worked at the park beginning in 2012, overseeing education, conservation and marketing, giving the new ownership some continuity with Sea Life Park itself. Most recently, she worked as a business manager at Yim & Yempuku Law firm in Honolulu.

Animal welfare remains part of Sea Life Park's story.

Animal welfare concerns surrounding the park aren't new. A [2022 Civil Beat investigation](#) examined animal deaths, previous federal citations and criticism of captive marine mammal attractions. Sea Life Park disputed much of that criticism and has pointed to its conservation, research, and educational work. That controversy is yet another part of what Hawaiian Council has inherited.

Since we first published this article, Hawaiian Council has given its clearest indication yet of how the dolphin program could change. After PETA urged the new owner to end breeding and move the dolphins to seaside sanctuaries, Lewis responded that Hawaiian Council has "no interest or intention of breeding dolphins at Sea Life Park." Its immediate priority, he said, is caring for the animals already there while determining their longer-term future based on each animal's health, welfare, history and needs. ✕

That doesn't mean dolphin encounters are ending or that the existing dolphins are leaving. Neither has been announced. PETA continues to advocate seaside sanctuaries, while Hawaiian Council says its decisions will combine Hawaiian knowledge with marine science and veterinary medicine.

among Sea Life Park's biggest draws, but there is now a public discussion about their longer-term future there.

The new Sea Life Park is taking shape.

Visitors going soon still shouldn't expect to encounter an entirely reinvented attraction. The sale happened just over a month ago, and the larger transformation will take significant time.

Hawaiian Council bought one of Hawaii's most recognizable legacy attractions, along with its animals, aging infrastructure, deferred redevelopment, a complicated history, and decades of visitor memories, both good and bad. It also bought a place with one of the most extraordinary settings of any visitor attraction on Oahu.

If you visited Sea Life Park years ago, what do you remember, and how do you feel about the direction its new owners are taking?

By **Rob and Jeff**, Beat of Hawaii.

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8 thoughts on “Sea Life Park’s New Owners Make Their First Big Dolphin Decision”

Tammy

September 20, 2026 at 3:57 pm

I agree with M.K. We stopped taking our children to see captive dolphins as well as other captive animals many years ago. They will follow suit and not take their kids to see these things as well. I think decreased attendance numbers could very well be due to similar thinking from others.



REPLY



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Sarah

September 20, 2026 at 9:53 am

No thank you, not at the cost of \$118 for 2 people.



T E

September 20, 2026 at 6:16 am

Hey, they sank the Falls of Clyde rather than let an outside group restore it. The powers that be have tried to shut down Ford Island by pricing the cost of keeping the carrier there. The Council has stepped up to do something about Sea Life Park and now is worried about the cost. When the cost to get in is outrageous, fewer customers is the result. What they have is unique, but people will choose with their wallet and chose other things. Families are being left out...\$40 or \$50 for a keiki is nuts. And those charges on speculation of "great things to come" means why go now, wait until it's fixed.



REPLY

M.K.

August 14, 2026 at 4:25 am

I have never been to Sea Life Park.

I have no interest in seeing sentient animals ^{Ad ends in 6} kept in captivity for our entertainment. It's well past due to move away from this type practice.

Hawaiian cultural shows, entertainment, education, conservation, etc. I'm all for.



REPLY

August 13, 2026 at 3:58 pm

I only visited Sea Life Park once in the 1990s and remember the dolphin show was quite impressive. Maybe it wasn't just the dolphins but the beautiful view that struck me. In recent years I have wondered what happened to the Park. I never see it advertised and, frankly, thought it had closed after the pandemic. From the article, it sounds like the new owners are looking to create a cultural center with sea creatures. Chef Roy is also an odd choice for this type of establishment, in my opinion. But I do hope with enough time and money that the Park will be brought up to modern standards and once again provide an enjoyable experience.

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REPLY

Kahea

August 12, 2026 at 3:44 pm

Having seen what Native Hawaiian Council, recently Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement, has done so far in their wide-reaching ambitions that were fueled by Covid money, I am concerned for Sea Life Park. They tried to put a luau at Kapiolani Park which was not legal, they put a luau into a hotel and had a Korean-themed buffet, they are opening a semi-tent-city "makeke" in Lahaina. They use grant money to have "conventions" that don't seem to have a purpose. Always searching for ways to get grants, justify their salaries, expand expand using "native Hawaiian" as their foot in the door. So what is their intent with Sea Life Park? That's a lot of animals and a lot of history to be

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REPLY

Andy A

August 12, 2026 at 12:49 pm

Remembering Fat Fred from many years ago!

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REPLY

BH

August 12, 2026 at 11:00 am

Unless things have changed in the last year or so, the only dining at Sea Life Park is outdoors (it is under cover from the sun, has an “order and pay at the counter” rather simple menu, basic tables and seating, etc.). It will be interesting to see what Roy Yamaguchi could do with that space and set-up, or perhaps the plan is to develop an indoor or nicer outdoor-type restaurant there. He has a very nice outdoor (100% open to the air and great menu selections) restaurant (“GOEN”) in rather nearby Kailua. Also, among other restaurants, he has one (the original Roy’s) on the other side of Sea Life Park in nearby Hawaii Kai.

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REPLY



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