

STAR performer

WHETHER THROUGH HER ROLE AT MELBOURNE AQUARIUM, LENDING A HELPING HAND TO VOLUNTEER ORGANISATIONS OR LOOKING AFTER ANIMALS AT HOME, OLIVIA ELFORD DISPLAYS A DEEP PASSION FOR THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT.

What is your role at Melbourne Aquarium? I am currently employed in the Education and Interpretation department and I lead tour groups around all the beautiful exhibits. I also conduct interpretation and presentations scheduled at various times each day around the building. A few times a week I help out in the Curatorial department feeding the sea jellies and cleaning their exhibits, as well as working in our Antarctica exhibit with King and Gentoo penguins.

How did you get the experience for your job? After completing a Bachelor of Biological Science with a major in marine science, I spent a few months volunteering with the Marine Discovery Centre and the Gould League. Then I was lucky enough to be offered a job at Melbourne Aquarium way back in 1999 prior to its opening, even before all the fish had arrived in the exhibits. I started out with the Visitor Services team, before moving to the Education and Interpretation department shortly after.

What is the most rewarding part of your work? The best part of my work is meeting visitors who are interested in learning more about the marine environment and the animals we have here on display. It is rewarding to receive letters and stories from children I have met over the years.

Who is your favourite Melbourne Aquarium animal? While he is no longer at Melbourne Aquarium, I'd say it would be Miles the Flatback turtle. This beautiful baby turtle was found washed up on a Victorian beach in 2004, nearly 2000 kilometres away from his preferred tropical waters. He was brought into Melbourne Aquarium under a rehabilitation permit and we nursed him back to health. In 2007, he was fighting fit and released back into the wild in the warm waters of Queensland's Hervey Bay – a sad, but very proud day.

How do you interact with the marine environment outside of Melbourne Aquarium? I really enjoy rockpooling and beachcombing – my favourite spots are Queenscliff, Jan Juc, Torquay and Blanket Bay. I regularly come across sea anemones, sea stars and many different types of seaweed. I always keep an eye out for an octopus, but I am yet to find one. My best beachcombing finds were a dried-up Weedy seadragon, a shark egg with a shark still alive in it and a \$20 note floating in a rockpool! I also volunteer my services to help out with projects in the marine environment. I am a member of the Green Volunteers and I have helped with projects along the Victorian coastline, mostly sand dune habitat studies, as well as some work with Orange-bellied

parrots in Werribee. I also get involved in revegetation work for Coastcare and every year I do Clean Up Australia Day.

Do you have your own fish at home? I have always enjoyed keeping fish at home. I got my first goldfish when I was about 8 years old and my passion for the aquatic environment grew from that point. I currently have nine tanks at home and I mostly keep tropical freshwater. I have a number of catfish, a huge barramundi, a Long-finned eel and heaps of yabbies. My favourite is a stud male yabby called Rah – he is bright blue and makes lovely blue babies.

About two years ago, I started breeding yabbies for the aquarium trade industry. Yabbies breed a few times each year and it takes about six months to get them to the right size. The only trouble is that the bigger yabbies eat the smaller ones, so you need to make sure there are similar sized yabbies in each tank.

What's the best thing you have ever done? It is definitely when I walked the entire coastline of Victoria conducting a habitat survey on snails over a seven-month period. One of my friends was studying for a Masters thesis and I went along for the journey. The habitat survey focused on the variations in the population Black Nerite snails, which is an indicator for certain types of environmental pollution.

We conducted a transect survey every 50 metres along the coast. We recorded the population of these snails in different regions of Victoria and in all sorts of different habitats, such as above and below storm water drains, industrial areas, parklands and crown land. The changes in these snail populations provided an insight into some heavily-polluted areas that were previously undetectable using other available technology. This information was catalogued and a map was produced for the Environmental Protection Authority.

Who is your role model? I really respect Australian shark and marine expert Valerie Taylor – I think she is ace! She has dedicated 50 years of her life to educate people about the marine environment and started in an era when not many women were part of the ocean-going population.

Valerie has been instrumental in changing the perception that “the only good shark is a dead shark” and her tireless work with the Grey Nurse shark along the east coast of Australia has helped stop the species from becoming extinct. She was also one of the first people to propose marine sanctuaries for sharks and to protect the habitats they live in.



fast facts

NAME: Olivia Elford **AGE:** 32 **BIRTHPLACE:** Ballarat, VIC **RESIDENCE:** Clayton, VIC
OCCUPATION: Interpretation / Education at Melbourne Aquarium **Qualifications:** Bachelor of Biological Science
DID YOU KNOW? I have eaten witchetty grubs cooked on the engine of a car