

Public Aquarium—Everybody's Project

Mr A.C. Waldon, Extension and Publicity Officer, gave the following talk on A.B.C. Radio recently.

"When the Department's Marine Research Laboratory was built at Waterman in 1968 many people expressed disappointment at the fact that the aquarium facilities were not open for public viewing - indeed, many thought that this was the prime function of the building. Waterman, however, was designed and erected as a research laboratory for the study of marine problems associated with the commercial fisheries of this State. Although an aquarium does exist it is not in the form envisaged by most people - there are no large glass tanks, exotic and colourful fish, display panels or display equipment. Tanks - which can be anything from a small beaker to a 6 ft. diameter metal container - are set up as and when required for a particular experimental study programme, and then they contain material or animals which are not of a display nature or of interest to the public. This then raises the questions: Is there a need for a public aquarium in Perth, and, if such a unit were built, would it serve any useful purpose beyond the obvious one of public entertainment.

Firstly, let us look at the entertainment from the tourist point of view. The attendance figures of aquaria throughout the world indicate that there is little doubt that such an amenity attracts tourists in large numbers whether the aquarium is a large one costing millions of dollars or a modest building housing a few small tanks containing only small fish. Tourism is Western Australia's second largest interstate export earner. At the moment, the tremendous developments taking place in this State are a tourist draw card. But, as some of the glamour wears off, and the tempo eases, there will need to be left other more permanent features to attract and hold visitors. Unfortunately progress seems to be pushing our wildflower areas further away and then in ever diminishing quantities. Except for a few small commercial ventures - and the old and somewhat deficient aquarium in Taronga Park, Sydney - Australia does not have a modern, well equipped aquarium in which to display the wealth of our oceans. Public aquaria have been built in many cities in Asia, Europe and America and almost without exception they have proved enormously popular with the public. They seem to be just as successful in small cities the size of Perth as in large cities such as London, New

York and Tokyo. There are ambitious ones with large ornate pools for porpoises and sharks - such as the Oceanic Foundation in Hawaii, the Durban Aquarium, or the \$20 million national Aquarium being built in Washington - and there are those which have only a series of small aquaria such as Monaco and Plymouth. But what of the educational value of aquaria? The aim of a public aquarium must go beyond entertainment and it must create within the community an awareness of the importance of the sea to them in their everyday life. Western Australia has already become the economic leader of the Australian fishery and further developments at present being contemplated and studied will assuredly bring our fishery into more prominence - and provide greater opportunities for employment and expansion. It is essential that future generations have a greater knowledge and understanding of the ocean environment. We must therefore make provision to educate not only ourselves but our children and our children's children in the potential, importance and majesty of the oceans which surround us. And so there exists a need not only for knowledge to be acquired through scientific research and study, but also for education of the people through observation and understanding of this last great frontier. Education classes from schools could be specifically catered for in the design of an aquarium and the Education Department should be encouraged to include visits to the centre as part of every child's school education. The Vancouver Public Aquarium has made a project of children's education in the provision of a special education centre within the aquarium. Here children, released from the normal classroom routine, but under professional supervision can carry out their own investigations by looking at, and examining living specimens with the most advanced visual equipment, microscopes and other educational aids. Education on this scale might not be contemplated for Perth children in the beginning, but provision can most certainly be made in the initial planning for future development and progress towards this ideal. Sydney may have its Opera House, but I feel that a modern aquarium for Perth would serve more purpose, be of more value, and add even greater prestige to our city. Yes, I most certainly think we should have an aquarium, - don't you?"

I received an account last week that was to the point. It was worded; Dear Sir, you have been on our books for ten months - even your Mother didn't carry you that long!