



The Nat's 150th Anniversary Is Full of Scientific Celebration

by Makayla Hoppe

In 1874, a group of scientists and naturalists formed the San Diego Society of Natural History. Their goal was to innovate, discover and study the ecosystem and habitats in Southern California. Today, that society has become the San Diego Natural History Museum, which shines as a pillar of Balboa Park and has helped San Diegans learn more about their city and the scientific world around them.

The museum is celebrating its 150th anniversary in 2024, and there is a full roster of events, exhibits and opportunities to enjoy.



The anniversary celebration officially kicked off in January with the groundbreaking of a new native plant garden around the museum. “Nature Trail at The Nat” is a 22,000-square-foot outdoor exhibit that showcases the local flora and fauna; it is free to all visitors and serves as the centerpiece of a new education initiative.

“We’ve been working in partnership with the city and Balboa Park to essentially convert that landscaping that was mainly grass and traditional ornamental foliage—and some trees that had just been dying—into a new native habitat,” said Rebecca Handelsman, senior director of communications and exhibits for The Nat. “So, we have little pocket gardens that surround the building, focused with interpretation and signage that focuses on different aspects. And that’s essentially taking the museum outside of our doors, if you will, greening the city and helping teach people about the benefits of native plants.”

The nature trail opened to the public on June 29 with a special “Garden Fair,” which featured discussions with community partners, free flower seeds, raffles and a giant game of Chutes and Ladders focused on local wildlife.

If you’d like to venture inside the museum, The Nat is offering a special exhibition for their birthday.

“It’s a small exhibit on our 4th floor called ‘Action from the Archives,’” Rebecca said. “It’s sort of a historical review of our what I would call greatest hits in conservation over the past 150 years, and that’s a lesser-known aspect of the organization. A lot of people think of us as the building or the museum, and that is essentially the physical form our research takes...but lots of people don’t know about all of the fieldwork and research that goes on behind the scenes and has for decades.”



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If you’re looking for a party, The Big Birthday Bash will be held on September 27. It is described as an “un-stuffy, unexpected, unusually fun un-gala celebrating [The Nat’s] 150th birthday.” The gala will feature food, drinks, activities and a silent auction.

“It’s not your traditional sit-down dinner in the atrium with 300 people,” Rebecca said. “It is an all-museum-plus-rooftop event. The museum will be completely decked out with lounge seating and music. [There will be] live musicians, scientist meet-and-greets, and we’re bringing in some really well-known chefs in town.”

The food from featured restaurants will include Juniper & Ivy and Chef Owen Beatty; Rancho La Puerta and Chef Reyna Venegas; TRUST Restaurant Group and Chef Brad Wise; and Valle and Chef Roberto Alcocer. Specialty desserts will be provided by Hatsuzakura; Sugar Kiln and Chef Lea Marie Dennis; Sweet Petite Confections and Chocolatier Michelle; and Lomelin.

The museum building will be receiving some upgrades in honor of the celebration, as well.

“A paleontology center is being built in the lower level of our museum,” Rebecca said. “It was formerly our traveling exhibit hall, but we’re not doing many traveling shows anymore. We’re basically turning that lower-level basement space into a brand new state-of-the-art collection space for our Paleo collection. It’ll also be open to the public through a glass wall; you’ll be able to see scientists at work.”

The paleontology section of The Nat currently has 1.5 million items from San Diego and other areas of Southern California. According to Rebecca, the museum holds contracts with developers, landowners, the military and others to have paleontologists on sites when construction happens. The collection has been growing for decades.

The Nat’s Board of Directors Chair, Andy Garman, firmly believes in the museum’s dedication to preserving San Diego’s natural habitat and celebrating it for another 150 years.

“We’ve been going through a sort of long-term strategic planning process this year to really think about the future of the museum and what we want to be,” Andy said. “Our emphasis is going to be more and more on being a conservation organization that gets actively involved in preserving the flora and fauna of San Diego County and also, to a lesser extent, Baja Mexico. It’s just so important now that we preserve the natural environment.”

Happy 150th birthday to the San Diego Natural History Museum. May you continue to educate and conserve San Diego for many more decades to come. ☆