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The new Tybee Island Marine Science Center facility is the first of its kind in this region to feature a Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary exhibit that offers visitors a chance to virtually experience the live-bottom reef

(Tybee Island, GA) – Visitors to the Tybee Island Marine Science Center's new facility are now able to virtually experience NOAA'S Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, from diving the live-bottom reef to observing the underwater creatures and coming up close and personal with a loggerhead sea turtle.

Cathy Sakas, president of the Tybee Island Marine Science Center's Board of Trustees said, "Visitors of all ages are in for a real treat. Our Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary exhibit is unlike any other in this area, as you can see what nature has formed over thousands of years at the reef without boarding a boat."

Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary is 19 miles off of the coast of Georgia and it is one of 14 national marine sanctuaries and two national marine monuments that make up the National Marine Sanctuary System. Gray's Reef spans about 22 square miles and it is currently the only protected natural reef area on the mid-continental shelf off the Georgia coast. The invertebrates (animals without backbones) provide food for many fishes that also shelter in the reef's cracks and crevices, giving the habitat of Gray's Reef the "live bottom" name.

"This exhibit at Tybee is the first in the region, so we're really excited," explained Ben Prueitt, Outreach and Social Media Coordinator for Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary. In the past few weeks, about 4,000 people have visited the Tybee Island Marine Science Center and experienced the Gray's Reef exhibit. "A lot of people are surprised that the reef is out there and that it's not flat. It's really an ocean oasis. With this exhibit, folks can dive virtually, observe 900 invertebrate species, and more," Prueitt said.

Design of the multi-media gallery and touchscreen took about nine months. "We worked with Hamline University's Global Center for Environmental Education in Minnesota. They have done a lot of land-based projects with National Parks and this was their first time working on an ocean-based park," noted Prueitt. Design of the wall panels and other elements took about two months.

"The touchscreen multimedia gallery is interactive and offers the public a chance to learn about the reef migration of fish and other interesting highlights through a suite of 360° photos and videos that haven't been presented to the public until now. You'll get to see a loggerhead sea turtle that swims right over the camera and later bumps into a nurse shark, an interactive living reef, and hear shrimp snapping and other noises via recordings from the hydrophones we've placed in Gray's Reef. These are recordings with underwater microphones that let us hear what is out there." For more information about Gray's Reef, please go to <https://graysreef.noaa.gov/>.

Tybee Island Marine Science Center's capital campaign is still underway to help raise funds for the remaining exhibits, and the Center encourages people to go to their website, <https://bringingtheoutsidein.org/>

About the Tybee Island Marine Science Center: Our mission is to cultivate a responsible stewardship of coastal Georgia's natural resources through education, conservation, and research. For more information, please go to tybeemarinescience.org.