



Creating a sustainable business model: Bigger vs better

By: James Hekkers, Managing Director

Institution: Monterey Bay Aquarium, California, USA

As a public aquarium, our ability to educate, inspire and motivate people to conserve the oceans depends on the long-term financial health of our business. Economic conditions, changing public perceptions and ageing infrastructure all threaten our sustainability. A key question for us has been whether to “get bigger” (expand in physical size and environmental impact) or “get better” (provide the necessary resources while minimising environmental impact). The lessons learned about this choice may inform other institutions contemplating their own sustainable business models.

To ensure both financial and environmental sustainability, our business model must provide resources to maintain infrastructure, operations and programmes, while ensuring that our behaviour stays true to our conservation message.

Since 2002, Monterey Bay Aquarium has been debating whether or not to undertake a major expansion. We rejected plans that would increase our environmental footprint and raise operating costs to unsustainable levels. Instead, our business model has focused on continuous refreshment and improvement, new temporary exhibits and improved marketing.

We have raised funds for education, research and advocacy programmes, and taken steps to decrease our carbon footprint. Attendance stability, revenue growth, visitor experience ratings, programme impact, and reduced environmental impact indicate that this business model has succeeded so far.