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East Coast Zoological Foundation receives \$2.5 million gift from the Nelson Family to help build a world-class Aquarium and Conservation Center

MELBOURNE, Fla. (Feb. 9, 2024) – East Coast Zoological Foundation (ECZF) announces a \$2.5 million gift from Blain and Annette Nelson that will play a pivotal role in funding the Canaveral Lock exhibit at the future Aquarium and Conservation Center in Port Canaveral, Fla. The future Aquarium and Conservation Center will be the second campus built by ECZF, that currently owns and operates Brevard Zoo. It will focus on coastal conservation, environmental education and the rehabilitation of imperiled marine species throughout Florida. Following a \$25 million commitment from an anonymous donor in 2021 and a \$5 million gift from the DSF Charitable Foundation last year, this gift represents the third-largest private donation to [ECZF's Our Legacy Campaign](#), a \$100 million community fundraising effort to build the future Aquarium.

“We are excited to support the ECZF in the Aquarium project as it brings environmental education, conservation, and rehabilitation awareness to the coastal ecosystem we have enjoyed over the past

33 years” said Annette Nelson. “I have been fishing the Indian River since arriving in Brevard County in 1991 and have been fishing offshore from Port Canaveral for the past 20 years. The aquarium and its conservation mission are very important to the area” said Blain Nelson.

In recognition of the gift, Blain and Annette Nelson’s names along with the names of future donors will be proudly displayed at the Canaveral Locks. The 2,615-square-foot building will model the locks at Port Canaveral that provide a vital connection between the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian River Lagoon for cruise ships, fishing boats, recreational watercraft and wildlife. The star attraction will be a 32,300-gallon sea life habitat that emulates the underwater infrastructure of the lock system and showcases Florida gamefish such as redfish, drum, sheepshead, snook and jack. The building will also include an educational “water table” exhibit designed to model the linkages and flow of water between the Banana River, Port Canaveral and the ocean. Furthermore, the space includes a soft play area for younger children, an indoor café offering air-conditioned seating and an outdoor play space.

“We are incredibly grateful for such a generous gift from the Nelson Family,” said Chief Executive Officer Keith Winsten. “Their philanthropic dedication will create a remarkable impact on the community and the environment they deeply cherish. The Locks will provide impactful, immersive experiences designed to convey the knowledge needed to empower change and inspire action towards a more sustainable future.”

This gift was made by Blain and Annette Nelson, who owned and operated Nelson Engineering Co. on North Merritt Island for almost 30 years. After selling the company in 2022, the couple wanted to play an integral part in giving back to their community and be connected with the future Aquarium because they care deeply for the Indian River Lagoon and other coastal waterways. Nelson Engineering Co.’s first contract in the early nineties was with the Brevard County Environmentally Endangered Lands (EELS) program when the organization was run by Dr. Duane De Freese, who currently plays an integral part in the continued development of our future Aquarium.

Groundbreaking for the future Aquarium and Conservation Center is expected in the fall of 2024, with an anticipated opening in early 2027. The future Aquarium will span 14 acres of shoreline along the Banana River in Port Canaveral, reflect the distinctive aesthetic of Brevard Zoo and facilitate

meaningful connections between visitors and Florida's marine life and coastal ecosystems. The project is expected to create more than 900 jobs and attract over 300,000 tourists annually, engaging at least 525,000 visitors each year.

About East Coast Zoological Foundation

Driven by a mission to answer the call, East Coast Zoological Foundation (ECZF) is focused on educating, engaging and empowering the community to take action for conservation. The 501c(3) nonprofit located in Melbourne, Fla., includes Brevard Zoo and the future Aquarium and Conservation Center campuses that will work collaboratively to ensure the best results for wildlife. ECZF works directly with Florida species and the community to develop programs and workshops to make a difference locally and around the world. From sea turtle rehabilitations and releases, building living shorelines along the Indian River Lagoon, providing scholarships and grants to the community and more, the Foundation creates opportunities for guests to connect with nature and make an impact in conservation and education. Founded in 1986, ECZF is governed by a volunteer board of directors and receives no recurring operating funds from any city, county or state government, relying on donations from people and companies to continue answering the call for wildlife and the environment along Florida's Space Coast and beyond. To learn more, visit ourlegacycampaign.org.

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