



Dr. Adrienne Atkins

Staff
Veterinarian
Mote Marine
Laboratory
and
Aquarium

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An inquisitive woman traveled to the bottom of the continental shelf off the coast of South Carolina in a research submersible to study brittle stars (related to starfish) as part of her Master's degree. That woman is Dr. Adrienne Atkins, a third generation Floridian who played in the swamps near Jacksonville as a child and was hired last fall as the Staff Veterinarian of Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium.

Adrienne always loved animals and spent as much time as possible in a rowboat along the St. John's River in Putnam County. Her childhood toys were dolls and stuffed animals whose broken bones she tended to. She especially cared for her toy lion "Tawny" that frequently had a bandaged broken leg.

"I always wanted to be a veterinarian. Even before veterinary college, I worked as a kennel helper. In veterinarian school I specialized in exotic animals followed by six years of study on zoo and wildlife animals. I work with fish, marine mammals, and sea turtles. I perform preventative health care, treat illnesses, work in the sea turtle hospital, and become involved in the emergency stranding of sea turtles, dolphin whales and manatees along with veterinary technicians, biologists, and rehab staff. My day is filled with appointments, scheduled procedures, visiting patients at the rehab hospital, and performing abdominal and soft tissue surgeries, removing masses, amputations, and even removing eyes from fish," says Adrienne.

Despite describing herself as painfully shy, Adrienne is personable with a deep-seeded love of the animals under her care. Her major responsibility is the health and welfare of the resident animals who live permanently at Mote Aquarium that sees over 300,000 visitors a year. She coordinates care with husbandry staff for the medical, environmental, nutrition, and efforts to reduce stress in animals. Even though the facility is well-known for its colorful fish in the Aquarium and the otters, manatees, and turtles housed across the street from the main facility, Adrienne is the only full-time veterinarian. The rehab hospital has a full-time medical care coordinator and an animal care technician, three part-time staff, and undergraduate interns when available.

She says her rewards come from healing an animal and helping an animal help itself, stressing that it's not her who heals the animal, but the animal itself. Even when achieving a positive outcome for an animal, she knows that the animal may face the same illness or injury again. Unfortunately, like infants and toddlers, animals can't tell you what's ailing them. Wildlife animals frequently don't want to show that they're ill, so staff must rely on observation and intuition for subtle indications that the animal is sick. Since 1984 Mote has rehabilitated 70 dolphins and small whales and released 21 back into the wild. About 560 sick and injured sea turtles have received care and almost 300 were released. Even though the primary goal is the rehabilitation and release of injured animals, a secondary goal is to study their biology and disease processes.

As a generalized specialist Adrienne's expertise is working with zoo and wildlife species, surgery, and consultation with human doctors. She says one important aspect of her practice is keeping wildlife safe by insuring an adequate level of anesthesia and keeping animals properly restrained.

As physicians do for humans, she also utilizes ultrasounds and x-rays to diagnose injuries or illnesses in the animals.

Dr. John E. Reynolds, III, Senior Scientist, Mote Marine Laboratory, says, "Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium was very fortunate when Dr. Adrienne Atkins joined the staff last year. Not only is she an extremely skilled and knowledgeable young veterinarian, but her passion for ensuring the well-being of the animals under her care is fantastic. She has quickly developed a great working relationship with Mote's animal care staff and aquarists, among others. My fingers are crossed that Mote and its myriad animals will continue to enjoy and benefit from her presence for years to come."

Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium actually began as two separate entities. Mote Marine Laboratory—now with 79 research staff including 35 Ph.D. scientists—was founded in 1955; 25 years later the Mote Aquarium was founded and now employs 50 people. Today the total number of employees is 201. Many are familiar with the Aquarium that houses 100 marine species with a focus on local marine life. A little known fact is that Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium has several locations: the main location in Sarasota, the Mote Aquaculture Research Park in Sarasota, the Boca Grande field office, the International Center for Coral Reef Research and Restoration in Summerland Key, and the Living Reef Exhibit at NOAA Eco-Discovery Center in Key West. Mote's impact on the local and state economy is \$86.8 million.

During the interview Adrienne drew a diagram with three intersecting circles of conservation, environment, and health. She explains the one-health concept, "For about the past 10 years the one-health concept explores how medicine and animals impact each other. This is a shift and looks at conservation, health and the environment with health dependent on the environment. One of my short-term goals is to study the environmental impacts on wildlife such as plastics and red tide and to put pieces together to improve health. More researchers are incorporating health in their research. The challenge is to make a difference through a direct or indirect impact on the environment. The bigger picture lesson is that everything has an impact on the environment."

Adrienne came to Mote from the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens where she was a zoo and wildlife veterinarian for six years. After earning a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from the University of Tennessee, she finished a small animal internship in Arizona and a zoo and wildlife internship at Oklahoma State University and the Tulsa Zoo. Her residency in Zoological Medicine was completed at the University of Florida where she worked with organizations such as the Lube Bat Conservancy, St. Augustine Alligator Farm, and Disney's Animal Kingdom.

Raised as an only child, she cites her father and grandmother as her greatest supporters along with her mentor during her residency at University of Florida, Dr. Scott Citino. She and her boyfriend enjoy leisure time with their Rhodesian Ridgeback dog Mia and spending as much time as possible out of doors. Late this summer they are traveling out west to view the total solar eclipse. On her long-range bucket list is volunteering with Doctors Without Borders. 🐾

STORY: Carol Darling

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