

**Ocean Institute
Dana Point, California**

Twelve months and counting, The Acorn Group and Split Rock Studios began with a blank slate, a ticking clock, and a tall order to transform an empty lobby into a immersive seascape that beckons the public.



In 2014 The Acorn Group collaborated with Split Rock Studios to enhance visitor experiences at the Ocean Institute in Dana Point, California. Nationally renowned for its marine science, environmental and ocean education and maritime history programs, the Institute recognized the need to engage members of the public who visit on weekends. While students participating in programs had access to the collections and equipment, weekend visitors were turned away at the lobby. They left not knowing what the Ocean Institute is or what services it offers. Our challenge was to create dynamic exhibits that capture the attention of the public, provide multiple “access points” to ensure age-varying audiences have meaningful experiences, and keep traffic flowing, particularly in the lobby. In less than one year, we moved from conceptual design through fabrication and installation. The new exhibit

complex, *Headlands and Beyond: A Hands-On Exploration*, highlights the underwater world just beneath the Dana Point Headlands. It includes:

New aquaria and three-story replicated kelp forest,

“Life in the Deep” gallery featuring tactile undersea topographic maps, interactive touchscreen technology, and models of deepwater fish,

Tidepool playscape that invites up-close viewing of oversized tidepool animals, including a bat star, sea hare, crab, anemone, mussel, chiton, and octopus,



“Science at Sea” interactive lab that focuses on saltwater chemistry and ocean acidification, and

Citizen science station where visitors measure dissolved oxygen, salinity, and other parameters, and monitor the presence of invasive species.