

**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 an immersive seascape that beckons and engages the public.*



In 2014, The Acorn Group collaborated with Split Rock Studios to enhance visitor experiences at the Ocean Institute. Nationally renowned for its marine science and maritime history programs, the Institute recognized the need to engage members of the public who visit on weekends. While students had access to the collections during the weekday, weekend visitors were turned away at the lobby. They left not knowing what the Ocean Institute actually does.

Our challenge was to create dynamic exhibits that capture the attention of the public, provide multiple “access points” to ensure age-varying audiences are engaged, and keep traffic flowing, particularly in the lobby. In less than one year, the project moved from 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 touchscreens, and models of deepwater fish,



Tidepool playscape that invites up-close viewing of oversized bat stars, sea hares, crabs, chitons, anemones, and octopi,



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

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