

## Meerkats Get a Christmas Gift at Maritime Aquarium — a New, Larger Living Space

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Connecticut’s only mob of meerkats — the popular family unit in The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk — is moving into a big new exhibit that connects their desert story to the influences of the ocean on climate and weather.

— *an announcement from* [The Maritime Aquarium](#)

Beginning Dec. 26, The Maritime Aquarium’s meerkats move upstairs into an exhibit twice as large as their original display. The new exhibit replicates the animals’ native African-desert habitat and offers the meerkats many new opportunities for climbing, digging and exploring. Plus, three viewing “bubbles” will give guests the chance to pop up right among the meerkats.

“These are active animals that are very charismatic with highly interesting social structures, so they’re a lot of fun for our guests to follow,” said Barrett Christie, the aquarium’s director of animal husbandry.

With the move to the second floor, “Meerkats!” now connects naturally with “Just Add Water,” the Aquarium exhibit that features desert-to-rainforest creatures in explaining how the world ocean drives climates around the globe.

“Incorporating the meerkats into ‘Just Add Water’ opens opportunities to continue and expand our conversation with guests about the role of the ocean in creating and affecting climates – and, thus, also creating and affecting diverse animal habitats – all around the world,” Christie said.

No mere cats, meerkats (*Suricata suricatta*) are small members of the mongoose family that live in social “mobs” of up to 30 members in the Kalahari Desert, in the southern African nations of Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. (Their desert environment is created by the Benguela Current, an ocean current off Africa’s west coast that brings cool dry winds over the continent.)

Meerkats were widely popularized by the comical sidekick Timon in Disney’s “The Lion King,” and then celebrated in the Animal Planet television series “Meerkat Manor.” They’re fascinating for living in structured, cooperative societies, including a survival strategy where adults take turns individually standing guard — often balanced upright on their haunches — watching for predators while the others forage or sleep.

The Aquarium’s “Meerkats!” exhibit features five sibling meerkats — three males, two females — born at the Hogle Zoo in Utah. The exhibit opened in May 2010 as part of a larger, temporary focus on African species.

But the amusing, guest-favorite animals became a permanent fixture, allowing the Aquarium to add a focus on the ocean’s impact on climate for even desert animals like meerkats.

That focus expanded in 2018 with the opening of “Just Add Water,” which features such species as a tamarin (a type of monkey), quail, a skunk, a prehensile-tailed porcupine, caimans, poison dart frogs, and bats.

The animals are displayed in separate biomes; that is, distinct communities of plants and animals that have adapted to a defined physical climate. The biomes begin at an arid desert and transition into habitats that receive increasing amounts of annual rainfall — through grasslands and temperate forests, among others — ending at a tropical rain forest.

“These animals’ vastly dissimilar environments are all the product of the ocean’s influence,” Christie said. “The exchange of heat between the ocean and the atmosphere drives much of Earth’s atmospheric circulation. When you factor in currents and winds, you have the ocean helping to create and shape the world’s habitats for wildlife — from desert environments with meerkats to rainforests with monkeys.”

“Meerkats!” and “Just Add Water” are free with Aquarium admission.