



Rick Banack manages the Galleon Reef, a 150,000-litre walk-through salt water aquarium at Club Regent Casino.

How does a Prairie boy become an underwater zookeeper?

PHOTOS BY JOE BRYKSA / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Salt water in his veins



Alison Mayes

RICK Banack looks like a much shorter version of Dennis Franz, the balding actor who played gruff detective Andy Sipowicz on TV's *NYPD Blue*. But the closest he gets to a gun is an aggressive Hawaiian trigger fish. Banack, 46, has been a local expert on the care of exotic fish for 25 years. Under contract through his company, Environmental Aquatic Services Ltd., he is curator of Manitoba's largest and most awe-inspiring aquarium, the walk-through, tunnel-shaped tank at the tropical-themed Club Regent Casino. In the huge saltwater tank, eye-catching groupers, puffers, triggers, tangs, look-downs, wrasses, damsels — even two

freaky-looking eels — can glide over visitors' heads, creating a 3-D sensation of being underwater with them. Do Banack and his staff give names to the colourful creatures? "I don't encourage it," says the brisk curator, wearing rolled-up sleeves and keeping a near-constant grip on his cellphone. After all, these are not pets but specimens, most captured in the wild because of the difficulties of breeding tropical fish. Banack's chief concern is maintaining an ecosystem as similar as possible to their native coral-reef environment. "These are wild animals," says Banack,

who likens himself to a zookeeper. "When they come in, they're right-proper wild." Talk to Banack for a while, and you realize that his apparent gruffness is just a shell (he adores turtles, by the way). He is a nature lover and environmentalist who cares as deeply about saving Lake Winnipeg as he does about ocean life. "I can't possibly fathom a life without fish," he says. He avoided the animated undersea movie *Finding Nemo* when it came out. Eventually, though, he "had to see it" to inform himself because casino patrons (who must be age 18 or older) kept searching for a blue tang and asking "Where's Dory?", the forgetful fish

voiced by Ellen DeGeneres. He now concedes that the tale of a clownfish trying to rescue his son, Nemo, from a dentist-office aquarium is "very nice." And he has a clownfish family anecdote of his own. He and his team obtained eggs laid by the aquarium's "tomato" clownfish and successfully raised them in the casino basement. About six months later, they were wary about reintroducing the young into the big aquarium, where there is a distinct hierarchy and upsetting the social order can have deadly consequences.

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"But when we dropped the young in, (the parents) took them right back, like long-lost children," he says. "It was very endearing."

Like Nemo in the movie, Banack was an only child. Half-Polish and half-Ukrainian, he grew up in Garden City, where his parents fully supported the fish fever that hooked him from the age of 10.

His grandfather built his first aquarium from old windows and a tin frame. "In those days (circa 1970) they didn't have silicone," he remembers, so tar was the sealant. Banack thinks he bought his first freshwater fish at Sears.

In his teens he kept meat-eating piranhas. (Today, he says, piranha buyers tend to be goth types.) Then he ventured into "crabs and crawlies" and other marine critters, when it was still unusual for anyone to keep ocean fish at home.

"A lot of the technology was brand new. In some instances we were inventing things as we were going — me and the pet shops. You'd have to buy one of those, and cut this and glue that, and make a thing, and that would work a little better. You'd try different fish and experiment with feeds."

The resourceful fish fiend took science courses at University of Manitoba, but dropped out after two years. At about age 22, the self-described "little Polish boy" launched an aquarium business — Rick's Aqua Exotics — out of his parents' house. It evolved through several locations and store names, including Something Fishy on Notre Dame and Winnipeg Aquarium Company on Pembina.

It didn't take long for the largely self-educated Banack to earn an expert



Rick Banack

■ Raised on Peony Avenue in Garden City, only child of a railway-worker father and government-employee mother. Graduated from Garden City Collegiate in 1978.

■ Banack and his seven staff, including his 26-year-old son Jason, are advanced scuba divers.

■ Has run his aquarium business since 1982, under several names and in different locations.

■ Lives on an acreage in Lorette with common-law partner Cecile Foster, a U of M student adviser.

reputation. The Assiniboine Park Zoo had his company install numerous aquariums when he was only about 23.

"Somehow we got this job," he remembers. "I was quite young to be in charge of all those people."

Years later, he set up the aquatic exhibit for the Zoo's Down Under project, importing four sharks.

About 11 years ago, Banack established the company's current name and location at 288 McDermot Ave. He gave up retailing to concentrate on manufacturing tanks, raising fish and providing maintenance to commercial clients, including offices and restaurants. "We do a lot of lobster tanks," he says. "We're currently doing all the

maintenance for Red Lobster in Winnipeg."

When Manitoba Lotteries decided to buy the tunnel aquarium and fish from a top Colorado company, Banack's tremendous expertise made him the top Manitoban — probably the only Manitoban — for the tendered curator's job of operating it, says his long-time friend and employee Mike Sinclair.

"He's the best there is, anywhere around us. There was only one person that I think could have taken care of it."

Sinclair says Banack is a compassionate boss who respects his staff's opinions and fosters team spirit. He's

a skilled cook who lays on a seafood feast for his employees and their spouses every Christmas.

The Club Regent contract makes up about half of Banack's business. Oddly enough for a boy from Winnipeg, he has won contracts to supply and install aquariums in tropical locations such as Antigua and Belize. Close to home, his company has recently equipped two rural clients to farm freshwater shrimp on a trial basis.

The international community of aquarium professionals, he says, freely exchanges advice and knowledge. He has contacts in places like California, Florida, Las Vegas and England. He has been able to take behind-

the-scenes aquarium tours in Vancouver, Seattle, Havana and London.

His home in Lorette is strewn with fish videos, reference books and research papers.

"The environment has been a huge thing for us all along," he says. "Global warming is slowly heating up the ocean, the ocean is getting less salty, the currents are changing, the coral reefs are in danger. . . . Whatever small bit I can do to abate the environmental calamity that's in front of us, I certainly do."

Banack is well aware that taking animals into captivity for entertainment can be controversial. He emphasizes that the casino fish are not "rare," in the sense of disappearing in the wild. Some, though, are large fish that are rarely seen in a home or office aquarium because of their size.

"I won't import a fish if it's threatening the wild population," he says. Whenever possible, he obtains creatures certified by the Marine Aquarium Council. That means they have been wild-caught in a sustainable way using environmentally friendly methods, and that collectors are paid "real money."

His dream project is to create a public aquarium for Winnipeg — a dream that his friend Sinclair is convinced he'll pull off. It would be a fitting attraction, Banack says, since Manitoba has ocean access at Churchill.

"I'm short about \$50 million," he quips.

"Maybe one day we'll find sufficient investment. We've got a lot of people trying to build stadiums all over the place. Maybe one of those rich fellas wants to throw us a few bucks, and we'll make a nice fish tank so the children actually have a big aquarium to go and see."

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Diver Mike Sinclair with a large puffer fish.

Club Regent Aquarium Facts

■ Manitoba's largest aquarium, holding 150,000 litres of salt water. Home to about 400 fish. Opened in 2000 inside Club Regent Casino. Officially known as Galleon Reef Aquarium.

■ The province's next-largest fish tank, says Rick Banack, is the one at FortWhyte Alive. The third-largest is a 24,000-litre one in Banack's shop.

■ Banack believes the acrylic Club Regent tank is the only "tunnel" aquarium in Canada. There is a similar walk-through tank at the Mall of America in Minnesota. It charges admission.

■ A scuba diver hand-feeds certain fish and eels and cleans the tank, usually from 12:30 to 1 p.m. daily.

■ Fish come from coral reefs in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans, the Red Sea and the Great Barrier Reef. The tank's coral is artificial.

■ Aquarium operators must be extremely knowledgeable and vigilant about the animals' health, behaviour, predatory tendencies and response to stress.

■ Filters, skimmers and pumps add oxygen to the water and remove wastes and toxins. Beneficial bacteria are cultured for the tank. Heaters and a timed lighting system help to mimic a natural reef. Extra tanks on the casino's lower level allow fish to be quarantined and prepared for introduction to the aquarium.

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