

FISH FANS GO WILD TO GET IN

By [JIM THARPE](#)

THE GOOD NEWS FOR THE GEORGIA AQUARIUM — it's the hottest ticket in town. That's also the bad news.

Callers and computer users overwhelmed the aquarium's call center and Web site Monday and Tuesday, stranding thousands of people trying to buy tickets to get a peek at the world's biggest fish tank in downtown Atlanta.

"We're taking calls all day, but the problem is the volume," Jeff Swanagan, the aquarium's executive director said Tuesday morning. "You might have a better chance with a lottery ticket than trying to get in right now."

By today, he said, officials plan to increase the call center's capacity by adding a hired subcontractor. And they will quadruple the capacity of the Web site. The call center had already doubled its original capacity to 19 people for the opening, but that proved inadequate, Swanagan said.

"You can't build your church for Easter Sunday," he said. "But now I'm thinking that might have been a good idea."

The overload hit Monday — the facility's opening day for annual pass holders — after NBC's "Today" show broadcast from the attraction. The Web site (www.georgiaaquarium.org) also was overwhelmed.

The crush abated Monday night, but resumed Tuesday.

The 8-million-gallon aquarium, which holds more than 100,000 fish and other animals, has been the focus of intense publicity on local, national and international stages. CNN and CBS will broadcast from the aquarium today, its official grand opening.

Mark Chute, a telecommunications worker from Dallas, Ga., — on the fringe of metro Atlanta — said Tuesday that he had tried for two days to buy tickets on the aquarium's Web site for his wife and 12-year-old daughter.

"We're looking forward to going," Chute said. "We're very proud of it. But we can't get to the information we need to get inside." Visitors who bought tickets before Monday apparently had little trouble, Swanagan said.

About 14,000 season pass holders toured the aquarium Monday and Tuesday as part of a controlled or so-called "soft opening" intended to work out kinks before today's grand opening.

The aquarium is using a "time ticketing" system that requires visitors to book their visit in advance with a specific arrival time. They can stay as long as they like once they arrive.

General admission ticket holders can visit beginning today, but they, too, must book their visit ahead of time.

Swanagan said officials are surprised not only by the volume of ticket demand, but also by the geographical reach of the demand. "People are buying annual passes from Texas and Michigan," he said. "It's amazing."

Aquarium spokesman Dave Santucci said the aquarium's time slots are mostly booked through Thanksgiving weekend.

"We expect another huge number of calls after all the publicity with the grand opening," he said. "We're asking people to please be patient until all the media attention dies down a bit."

Swanagan said it took him three tries Tuesday to get through to the aquarium's Web site and four calls to get through to the call center.

Ticket demand had been building for weeks, he said. The \$290 million aquarium had sold 80,000 annual passes by the time its doors opened. But it was the “Today” show broadcast Monday that blew the lid off, he said. The show reaches 6 million domestic viewers and millions more overseas.

“We’re going to start forwarding all foreign calls to Matt Lauer,” one of the “Today” hosts, Swanagan said.