

Headline: Underwater World not threatened by IR plans

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Page: H5

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Aquarium welcomes competition and says there could be spillover benefits SENTOSA'S Underwater World is here to stay. Despite fears by observers that it will be dwarfed by ambitious plans for Sentosa's new integrated resort (IR), general manager Kwek Meng Tiam yesterday said the 15-year-old attraction welcomed the competition.

If Genting International's \$5.2 billion proposal wins, its Resorts World will feature the world's largest oceanarium – the 8ha Quest Marine Life Park – which will house 700,000 marine creatures in a 30 million litre lagoon.

Rival bidder Kerzner-CapitaLand's proposal will have an even larger marine habitat, with a capacity of 109 million litres, including the world's largest jellyfish enclosure and a man-made reef for divers and those going snorkelling.

Owned by Haw Par Leisure, Underwater World's current capacity of five million litres houses some 2,500 aquatic creatures. Mr Kwek was confident that the aquarium would benefit from the IR's spillover effect, and attract like-minded visitors.

He said there are cities where aquariums of different sizes co-exist. "We have to see how it goes. The IR is still four to five years away," he said. For now, it is business as usual for the aquarium as it launched three new attractions yesterday – an interactive stingray feeding pool, a display of small marine reef species, and



Singapore's first fish reflexology spa, where spa fish gently nibble away at the dead skin on your feet – before the foot reflexologist gets to work. Underwater World will not shy away from future challenges, Mr Kwek added.

“Competition is everywhere. We can't avoid it, especially with Singapore being an open economy. We will launch new displays to sharpen our competitive edge so that we stay relevant,” he said. Underwater World, which also operates Dolphin Lagoon in Sentosa, took in \$28.7 million in revenue last year with 1.6 million visitors. It is confident of surpassing 2005's figures by the year end.

When questioned about industry speculation of a possible collaboration with the IR winner, Mr Kwek said there are no solid plans but “we are open to talks”. “When there's competition, there's always opportunity for cooperation,” he added.

The opening of the new features, which cost more than \$500,000, was timed to coincide with the year-end school holidays and festivities. Visitors such as Mr Danny Lin, 47, were seen enjoying the treatment at the fish spa. “This is a unique attraction, and I'm sure it will draw many other visitors,” he said. “Although the coming IR will increase competition, I think there are many loyal visitors who will keep this place going strong.”

The results of the Sentosa IR race are expected to be announced soon. To see the Underwater World's new inhabitants, log on to The Straits Times Interactive's free-access news video at www.straitstimes.com/jcheam@sph.com.sg.

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