

# New England Aquarium partners with SeaAhead to launch ocean-centric startups

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By Janelle Nanos Globe Staff, Updated April 19, 2021, 4:40 p.m.2



If Courtney Boyd Myers has her way, this will be the summer of the kelp burger.

Boyd Myers is the cofounder of [AKUA](#), a Cotuit-based company that makes meals and snacks out of massive strands of kelp grown in the coastal waters of Maine. After successfully bringing kelp jerky to market in 2019, the startup looked to make a vitamin-packed seaweed patty for backyard barbecues. So they sought out business advice from some of the folks who know the ocean best: scientists and marine experts from the New England Aquarium.

The ocean is a massive ecosystem, so why shouldn't it have a startup ecosystem all its own? That's the thinking behind the new [BlueSwell](#) Incubator Program hosted by the New England Aquarium and [SeaAhead](#), a local "bluetech" business group that works with startups that focus on maritime initiatives. AKUA was one of six BlueSwell startups that received \$35,000 each when they joined the cohort last November, and finished the 20-week accelerator program this month.

Boston is awash in startup hubs dedicated to biotech, greentech, cleantech, food tech, and other innovation sectors. SeaAhead launched with the idea of pooling resources for companies that put the ocean front and center.

“Our mission is venture innovation for the ocean,” said SeaAhead cofounder Alissa Peterson, who said that many companies that focus on marine efforts are often left at sea — pun intended — as they try to get off the ground. Other startups don’t have to deal with the size and scope of maritime-based challenges, which can range from managing aquaculture and fisheries to building global shipping networks and underwater Wi-Fi networks.

When explaining the blue economy to outsiders, Peterson said, “Sometimes people say, ‘Oh, isn’t that kind of niche-y?’ But, I mean, it covers 70 percent of the planet.”

SeaAhead launched in 2018 and had been operating out of the Cambridge Innovation Center’s Boston building downtown. Partnering with the New England Aquarium to launch the BlueSwell Incubator Program was a natural evolution in SeaAhead’s efforts to create an ocean-startup ecosystem, Peterson said.

And it was yet another extension of the work done by the aquarium to assist in the corporate stewardship that has become increasingly centric to the institution’s mission, said John Mandelman, vice president and chief scientist of the aquarium’s Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life. Mandelman said the aquarium’s staff have been assisting massive multinational corporations like Marriott Hotels, DuPont, and Gorton’s Seafood on best practices for conservation and sustainability, so it was a welcome opportunity to offer smaller startups guidance and connections.

“How can we put real substance behind what these founders are doing to try to address sustainability?” he said.

Over the course of the program, the aquarium’s scientists worked with founders like Boyd Myers to offer mentorship on their business plans, giving her advice, for example, on how she should pitch her products in terms of their carbon impact.

Kelp is known for its ability to help pull carbon from the ocean, which can help to lower rising sea temperatures, she said, but calling her kelp jerky a “carbon-negative snack” wasn’t quite right, the scientists explained. She’s now working with the kelp farmers she partners with to allow for some of the harvested kelp to settle back to the sea floor to help keep the carbon cycle intact.

And through the connections that the aquarium has created with its sustainable seafood efforts, she’s made inroads to local restaurants and institutions that are now considering adding kelp burgers to the menu.

“This summer we’re going to be able to be in great restaurants, and we’re going to be selling direct to consumer on our website,” Boyd Myers said, thanks in large part to the work she was able to accomplish during the accelerator program.



The kelp burger from AKUA, which will be available in restaurants and on their website this summer thanks in large part to the work Courtney Boyd Myers was able to accomplish during the accelerator program. AKUA

The aquarium’s scientists offered advice and connections to the other startups in similar capacities. They connected Oyster Common, which runs an artificial intelligence-powered marketplace for local seafood, with local nonprofits and restaurants that emphasize sustainable seafood. The aquarium’s own diversity initiatives within the Marine Conservation Action Fund aligned with the work being done by Vinci VR, a startup which uses virtual reality to create simulated trainings for dangerous environments like offshore wind turbines. The technology can simulate the sensation of operating high above the ocean on a turbine, providing an entry point for training some of the 83,000 anticipated new offshore wind workers that could be hired in the sector in the next ten years.

The full cohort included three other startups: H2Ok Innovations, an analytics platform working to help clean up industrial wastewater; SeaDeep, which offers data analysis and 3D color visualization of the sea floor for sustainable offshore development; and HydroNet, which is building and operating high-speed Wi-Fi communication networks underwater.

SeaAhead and the aquarium have signed on for two more cohorts and anticipate that the program will grow over the coming years. They've raised over \$2.6 million to support the effort through a combination of family foundations, private donations, and public sector support.

The ocean is wide and deep, Peterson said, and she's hoping that through BlueSwell, the ecosystem for startups in the years ahead will be similarly vast.

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Janelle Nanos can be reached at [janelle.nanos@globe.com](mailto:janelle.nanos@globe.com). Follow her on Twitter [@jellenanos](https://twitter.com/jellenanos).