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Mermaids are having a moment. They're popping up in public pools, scaly tails shining in the fluorescent lights, causing double takes and stirring up a little controversy.

It's hard to pinpoint why mermaids are suddenly everywhere. Worries about safety prompted Edmonton to ban the use of mermaid tails in city pools. There's even an academy, called Aquamermaid in Montreal, that offers instruction on how to swim with legs encased in silicon. Perhaps mermaids are an extension of the popularity of superheroes among people who like their mythological creatures from the sea. Whatever the reason, Halifax's Stephanie Brown and Sean Norman couldn't be more thrilled.

The couple founded Halifax Mermaids, a company that provides educational and entertainment experiences with mermaid performers. They are booked solid through the summer and have recently expanded their school of fish-people to five.

"There's a boom. It's almost a little crazy," Mr. Norman says.

The pace at which their business has grown since it launched last year has taken both first-time entrepreneurs by surprise, particularly since it started out as a hobby. In 2007, Ms. Brown took to the pool while rehabilitating from an injury, and soon got hooked on mermaid lore. It started with watching Darryl Hannah flip out of a bathtub in the 1984 camp classic *Splash*, and later she developed an interest in early feminist icon and movie star Annette Kellerman, who donned a mermaid tail onscreen before moving pictures became talkies.

"I didn't have ambitions at that time about building a business. I just wanted to experience swimming with a mermaid tail. So it motivated me to overcome what I was going through," says Ms. Brown, who performs under the name Raina Mermaid.

Several years later, after Ms. Brown graduated with a degree in child development and elementary education, she, like so many teaching hopefuls before her, discovered actual jobs were as rare as singing crustaceans.

With the encouragement of professors and parents, she began to explore the idea of combining her mermaid character with educational opportunities. A self-described "natural teacher," she found she'd instinctively used her persona to engage children in learning about the ocean.

"Imagination is key, and we need more variety of learning experiences," Ms. Brown explains. "There are multiple intelligences that need to be nurtured in order to build multiple understandings of things. A child may not respond to someone talking to them about the ocean, but a mermaid giving the exact same information holds them captive for a bit."

Education certainly plays a big role in Halifax Mermaids' appeal. One week they might be doing environmental advocacy work at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic for World Oceans Day; the next they could be swimming in the Aquatron Laboratory tank at the Dalhousie University's Life Science Centre.

But the partners are quick to point out that they're also in the entertainment business, because some days, they're playing to an audience of six-year-olds at a birthday party.

Hitting on a trend leads to multiple merchandising opportunities. Cosplay fans – people who enjoy dressing up as fictional characters – have been shelling out for elaborate beachfront photo shoots clad in the company's stash of mermaid tails. The

tails aren't cheap; custom models from Merbella Studios in Florida, where they get their scaly appendages, can cost as much as \$5,000. "They look Hollywood-esque," says Mr. Norman.

They also have retail merchandise in the works as well. For now they are mum on the details, although it's easy to imagine how a line of kid-sized tails and seahorse-encrusted accoutrements would make a killing during the summer birthday season.

Halifax Mermaids has also incorporated federally as Canadian Mermaids Inc. to ensure a foothold in the national mer-market. To further elevate their platform, Ms. Brown offers advice on swimming safely with synthetic fins.

"There is that fear that it's just going to take one person who's really enthusiastic but unprepared for something bad to happen," she says. "I published two books on safety to encourage others to prepare themselves."

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