

Carnegie exhibit digs up Amazon's riches

BY MICHAEL MACHOSKY
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

The Amazon has a reputation as a rough neighborhood.

That reputation goes all the way back to President Teddy Roosevelt, who came back from his Amazon sojourn with tales of swarming, carnivorous fishes who could devour an animal — or human — to the bone in a matter of minutes.

But really, it's not so bad. Just don't do anything stupid.

"Don't jump in fish guts," says Christine Mills, head of docents at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, who's helping train staff to deal with the new exhibit "Amazon Voyages: Vicious Fishes and Other Riches" opening Saturday.

Piranhas don't go into a swarming frenzy, attacking everything in sight — unless fishermen are cleaning their fish nearby in the water. That drives them crazy.



"Amazon Voyages" is a fairly new, family-friendly exhibit, created by the Miami Museum of Science and Planetarium, and coming straight from a stay at the Smithsonian.

Costing more than \$2 million, with grant money coming from the National Science Foundation, the exhibit took about five years to assemble.

It focuses on the "Seven

Children can get an up-close look at the wonders of the Amazon in "Amazon Voyages: Vicious Fishes and Other Riches" at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

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Perils of the Amazon" — and there are things much nastier than piranhas and anacondas out there.

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The exhibit also tries to depict the incredible biodiversity and unexpected beauty of the river and its environs.

"Basically, five years ago a buddy of mine, a curator for science in Denver, said, 'We're going down to the Amazon. Want to come?'" says Sean Duran, the Miami Museum's vice president of exhibitions — and Pittsburgh native. "Another buddy of mine, Ray Troll, an artist, had gone independently, and said, 'Dude, you've got to go. You've got to see this.'"

They met up with an eccentric, energetic field researcher named Paulo Petry from Harvard, a tropical biologist with unorthodox methods and a flair for the dramatic.

"Paolo really wanted people to see that every day, new discoveries are being made there," Duran says. "He also hated the whole labcoat image — he's more the Indiana Jones type."

The Carnegie exhibit lets you stick your head in a live piranha tank. Don't worry, you're actually in a glass bowl underneath a large fish tank.

You can reach into the belly of a replica of a giant catfish that the expedition found. Its peculiar contents include a monkey skull and a tennis shoe. There's also an electric eel activity that will shock you — literally.

Troll, an internationally renowned undersea artist, has created a panoply of giant murals depicting the river's myriad creatures in all their ferocious glory.

"People just get this impression that the Amazon is gone," Duran says. "If you don't care about something, if you think it's a lost cause, how are you going to line up to save it? What's the point?"

The exhibit is an attempt to capture the boundless energy and fearsome intellect of a scientist such as Paulo, who attacks problems from multiple, unexpected directions at once — not unlike a swarm of piranhas.



These fish make a splash in the local economy. Estos peces salpican la economía

A young visitor gets a fisheye view of an Amazonian fish in "Amazon Voyages: Vicious

Fishes and Other Riches" at Oakland's Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

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'Amazon Voyages: Vicious Fishes and Other Riches'

When: Saturday through Jan. 1. Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays
Admission: \$5; \$3 for senior citizens, students and children;

plus regular admission of \$10, \$6 for students and children, \$5 for senior citizens

Where: Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Oakland
Details: 412-622-3131

One part of the exhibit lets visitors sift through the leafy debris at the bottom of a river, an idea of Petry's that led to an incredible breakthrough discovery.

"Paulo found this brand-new species of fish," Duran says. "And he found it in a place that nobody would really think to look. He basically found it at the bottom of a mucky leaf-

litter bank. The animal shows features that you wouldn't expect to find. To be able to think about going fishing in the bottom of a pile of rotting leaves just shows a lot of creativity.

"Also, the fact that it's not just a brand-new species but



The piranha is one of several deadly creatures featured in the "Amazon Voyages" exhibit.

captain, matter-of-factly mentions, "There are thousands of fish in the Amazon that we enjoy — and seven that

enjoy us." Another exhibit traces the path of ornamental tetras from deep in the Amazon all the way to the fish-tank in your living room. It shows who gets paid what at each step along the way, and how the prices of these bright little fish keep increasing.

"There's this little town called Barcelos up the Rio Negro, 5,000 to 10,000 people," Duran says. "It's Nowheresville. But the last place, if I were a logger, that I'd want to be is at a bar in Barcelos. They'd take me out and kick my butt. I'd be lucky to make it home alive. Their livelihood is tied to the orna-

mental fish trade. Those guys make a living harvesting cardinal tetras and discuses — tropical fishes you can buy in

Pittsburgh."

For Duran, "Amazon Voyages" is a personal triumph as well. He's one of the few second-generation museum people in the country. His dad, Tom Duran, was a staff taxidermist for the Carnegie Museum for many years.

"There are thousands of fish in the Amazon that we enjoy — and seven that enjoy us."

"CAPTAIN MO"

AMAZON RIVERBOAT CAPTAIN, IN A VIDEO INTRODUCING "AMAZON VOYAGES"

"It's very flattering for me to have one of my exhibits at the Carnegie," Duran says. "It's the museum I went to when I was a little kid. I formed a lot of my ideas of what a museum is, and can be, by going there."

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A short film on the discovery, "Paulo and the Mysterious Muck Fish," has been selected for entry in several prestigious documentary film festivals. It's also part of the exhibit.

Another short video introduces the exhibit — "Captain Mo," a real Amazon riverboat