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## Preview: Amazon exhibit dishes out vicious fishes and tropical riches

Tuesday, September 05, 2006



Interactive displays, such as the chance for children to life a full-size, full-weight replica of an anaconda, are part of "Amazon Voyages: Vicious Fishes and Other Riches," the traveling exhibit from the Miami Museum of Science at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

By **Adrian McCoy**  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Artist Ray Troll's colorful mural "Fishes of Amazonia" (2000) shows a river teeming with life -- a wild jumble of fish and reptiles. It hangs at the entrance and serves as the perfect introduction to "Amazon Voyages: Vicious Fishes and Other Riches."

The traveling exhibit from the Miami Museum of Science is now at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History's R.P. Simmons Family Gallery.

Mixing science, nature and art, the exhibit invites visitors to explore the rich biodiversity of the Amazon River, and to understand more about this one-of-a-kind ecosystem.

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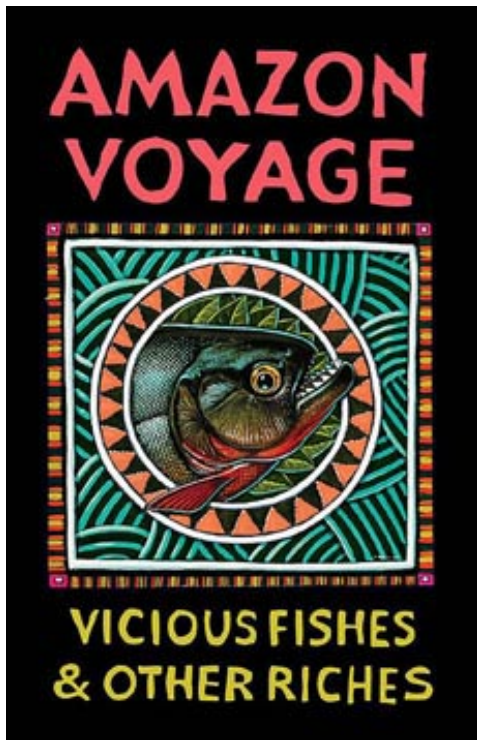
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The Alaska-based Troll is known for his fish- and ocean-themed "fin art," which has been exhibited in museums around the country. Troll's renderings of fish and other Amazon wildlife, carried throughout the "Amazon Voyages" exhibit, are done in his signature style -- a combination of detailed scientific accuracy and vivid imagination. Troll will give a lecture at 1 p.m. Oct. 14 at the museum.

"Amazon Voyages" was inspired by a trip Troll took with colleagues to the Amazon in 1997, which was a life-changing experience for the artist. A similar Amazon journey five years ago with a group of scientists had a similar impact on Sean Duran, vice president of exhibitions at the Miami Museum of Science, where "Amazon" was created. "The Amazon is a beautiful, beautiful place, and there are so many amazing things going on," he says.

The exhibit's visit here is a kind of homecoming for Duran, who grew up in Pittsburgh -- and at the Carnegie Museum, where his father, Tom, worked as a taxidermist in the 1960s. The second-generation museum professional who spent countless childhood hours in the Museum of Natural History gazing at dioramas is now part of the current generation creating informative and compelling new exhibits for all ages.



[Click photo for larger image.](#)

Another display simulates the mild electric shock a very small electric eel would give off.

## "Amazon Voyages: Vicious Fishes and Other Riches"

■ **Where:** R.P. Simmons Family Gallery, Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

■ **When:** Runs through Jan. 7, 2007.

■ **Tickets:** Surcharge of \$5 for adults, \$3 for seniors, children and students with valid ID in addition to regular museum admission; free for Carnegie Museum members.

■ **Information:** 412-622-3131.

The exhibit is devoted largely to notorious Amazon dwellers, such as the piranha, electric eel, sting ray, alligator and anaconda.

But it also teaches a lesson in conservation and respect for the environment, pointing to the ways humans pose a greater threat to the Amazon and its residents than they do to us -- including logging, illegal hunting, capturing live animals and plants for sale, mining and overfishing.

Younger visitors will love some of the interactive displays. They can don rubber gloves and fish around in a muddy tank, learning how specimens are gathered. They can reach inside the belly of a piraiba -- a giant Brazilian catfish -- and pull out what it had for dinner, including somebody's sneaker. And they can try to lift a full-size, full-weight replica of an anaconda.

Older visitors will learn about field research in the region. A new discovery in the natural world debuts here -- one so new it doesn't have an official name yet. A video on the so-called muck fish -- a hot dog-sized critter that lives in mud -- features Paulo Petry, the scientist who discovered it.

Another interactive display is based on Troll's "Amazonia" mural: Visitors can click on the individual animals depicted and learn more about them.

The displays often have a strong tactile element -- like the muck fish tank and the electric eel zapper. And it's not just hands-on for its own sake, Duran says. "We tried to connect the hands-on exhibits to what scientists really do in the field."

It's unusual for a nature museum to exhibit live critters, but "Vicious Fishes" features several species. There's a tank with some Amazon fish that have found their way to North American home aquariums, including several varieties of tetras. Another tank houses freshwater stingrays. In the Museum's Discovery Room, several guest red-bellied and black piranhas are on loan from a local pet store.

There's a lot more to see here: Through a balanced presentation of science and art, visitors will come away with less misconceptions about the denizens of the Amazon, and a clearer understanding of how important it is to preserve it.

"It's not all gone. It's not a lost cause," Duran says. "It's the most rich environment on the entire planet. You can't write it off. I hope people come away with a better feel for the depth and breadth of [the Amazon's] biodiversity."

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(Adrian McCoy can be reached at: [amccoy@post-gazette.com](mailto:amccoy@post-gazette.com).)

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