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## Traveling the Amazon in D.C.

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A voyage to the Amazon -- home to more varieties of fish than any other river in the world -- begins in the basement of the Smithsonian Institution's S. Dillon Ripley Center. The journey includes wrestling an anaconda, studying a stingray, learning how an electric eel shocks, and dancing a costumed samba.

However, the highlight of "Amazon Voyage: Vicious Fishes and Other Riches," a temporary exhibit on loan from the Miami Museum of Science and Planetarium, is simply digging through slimy mud. Young visitors stick their hands into superstrength gloves to dig through leaves and mud, simulating the work of researchers who look for muck fish -- a newly discovered species -- in the Amazon.

"Amazon Voyage," which will run through Aug. 6, is full of hands-on, tactile experiences for school-age children. The exhibit's bright colors, folk-art decorations and fun presentation make learning about the biodiversity, environment, flora and fauna of South America entertaining.

"The whole exhibit centers around the seven perils of the Amazon," says Ellen Dorn, director of special exhibitions at the Ripley Center's International Gallery. "Kids love it."

Those seven perils are explained in a video from "Captain Mo," an Amazon riverboat captain, when visitors board his riverboat to start the voyage. He talks of perils in the form of animals such as the caiman and stingray, but a display later explains the real perils -- environmental factors such as overfishing, piracy and poaching.

For better or worse, the relationship of man to the river is shown throughout the exhibit. There are photo boards and books showing how families build their homes (designed to withstand flooding) along the river and how they earn a living fishing.

Among some of the other lessons:

m Catfish diversity. There are some 1,200 species of catfish -- called piraiba locally -- in the Amazon, some of which are on display here. The fish can be as big as a bear or as small as an ant. To explain how scientists learn about animals by examining what they eat, visitors can do a "stomach search" on a catfish model. Reaching into the guts of the

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dolphin-size catfish and pulling out a tennis shoe and a monkey skull got a great reaction of "gross" from a couple of 9-year-olds.

m A large portion is devoted to the most popular killer fish, the piranha. Visitors are educated in piranha fact vs. fiction. For instance, most piranhas bite other fish, not people. Visitors can use hand cranks to move around cartoon piranhas and learn about the feeding habits of the 33 varieties of piranha. A whole section is devoted to the extinct mega-piranha, with its zig-zag teeth, which roamed the waters about 13 million years ago.

m Getting a tetra's-eye view of the world. One display shows how the exotic tetra fish gets from the Brazilian wild to a home aquarium. The display explains how about 1,000 people make their living collecting tetras. It then shows how the fish are imported and get to wholesalers and, eventually, retailers, in this country.

To impart the lesson of life in a fish tank, youngsters can crawl through a tunnel and come up in a dome inside a large aquarium. This also is a big attraction for the 6-to-10-year-old set.

The exhibit's other live tank includes stingrays. Experts from the National Zoo are helping care for the stingrays, Ms. Dorn says. Meanwhile, visitors can learn how stingrays adapt from saltwater to freshwater, how they camouflage themselves by burrowing in the sand and how their gills work to breathe underwater. On a colorful carpet, visitors can find a variety of stingrays with different patterns to see how the creatures hide.

Visitors reach the exhibit's end in colorful, Amazonian fashion. At a bright stage, lively Brazilian music plays along with a video of costumed locals dancing in the Barcelos fish festival, a Brazilian event that celebrates the benefits of fish collecting for the community.

A big selection of soft-sculpture costumes is available, and visitors can dance around with a big fish tail or claws. They can pretend they are a turtle, a dolphin or any other creature from the Amazon.

A group of 9-year-olds gave all the costumes a try. They pretended they were piranhas and danced the stingray shuffle. After a while, they did their own renditions of "the worm" across the dance floor. They may have been in a basement just off the Mall, but really, for just that minute, they were on the banks of the Amazon.

When you go:

Location: "Amazon Voyage: Vicious Fishes and Other Riches" is at the Smithsonian Institution's S. Dillon Ripley Center, 1100 Jefferson Drive SW, Washington.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily

Admission: Free

Parking: Limited street parking is available on the Mall. The closest Metro station is the Smithsonian stop on the Orange Line.

More information: Visit [www.si.edu/ripley](http://www.si.edu/ripley) or call 202/663-1000.



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