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Aquarium spotlights the strange and beautiful

KURE BEACH – Unique among the exhibits at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher, the Exotic Aquatics gallery focuses on life not normally found in the state’s waters. The Exotic Aquatics gallery, which opened in November 2005, provides a glimpse of the eco-systems of the world’s ocean from the Indo-Pacific to the Mediterranean.

The collection marks a major excursion from the facility’s 29-year tradition of showcasing only those aquatic life forms found in North Carolina’s freshwater, coastal and open ocean habitats. The gallery’s spectacular exhibits include some of the strangest and most beautiful animals from the far reaches of our planet.

Visitors will discover grotesquely beautiful Indo-Pacific lionfish and native scorpionfish, fluttering in their rocky lair; and more than a dozen colorful reef fishes of the Pacific coral atolls – butterflyfish, long-nose hawkfish, the percula clownfish and more – all browsing for morsels within their living-coral habitat.

Interpretive technologies help visitors learn about the gallery’s many strange and interesting species. A flat-panel liquid-crystal display at each exhibit provides facts and photo IDs to illuminate the featured animals. Screen content, controlled though an unseen computer, can be updated often to add variety to the visitor’s experience.

Hawaiian Fishes

Papahānaumokuākea National Monument, designated in 2006, is one of the world’s largest marine protected areas. Stretching 1,200 miles north of Hawaii Papahānaumokuākea contains 140,000 square miles of pristine islands and reefs. Over half the fish species found among the atolls exist nowhere else. Recently, the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher created a new exhibit showcasing reef fishes from these remote waters.

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The Hawaiian fishes are visible in a 600-gallon pedestal tank with a black background. The exhibit extends seven feet from the wall, providing visual access from a number of angles.

Lionfish

Lionfish are members of a family of fish known for inflicting venom by means of specialized spines. Several lionfish (*Pterois volitans*), and their close relatives, spotted scorpionfish (*Scorpaena plumieri*), are housed in a special exhibit within the *Exotic Aquatics* ensemble.

Creatures of the Indo-Pacific, lionfish were first seen in North Carolina waters in the summer of 2000 by scuba divers exploring offshore wrecks. Since then, their numbers have increased dramatically; they are now considered an invasive species that could threaten the survival of native fishes, including many of economic importance to our fisheries. Scorpionfish, common in the Atlantic, are found from Massachusetts to Brazil.

A wall-mounted 550-gallon exhibit helps visitors learn the similarities and differences between the two species, and presents theories as to how the lionfish may have been introduced and why it has thrived.

Pacific Reef

Another exhibit of 550 gallons displays at least a dozen species of fishes that share the Pacific-atoll coral reef habitat. Many will be familiar to visitors who have seen the Disney movie “Finding Nemo.”

This collection of fancifully colorful reef-feeders includes clownfish, angelfish, tangs, wrasses, butterflyfish, cardinalfish, and many more. The exhibit also contains living corals and other invertebrates found in Pacific reef habitats.



at Fort Fisher

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Like the other exhibits in the *Exotic Aquatics* gallery, the *Pacific Reef* includes interpretive panels and video monitors to aid visitors in learning about the animals and their ecosystems.

Spiny Lobsters

Spiny lobsters primarily inhabit the tropical and subtropical waters of the Atlantic, Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. Some can be found off the coast of North Carolina, as the waters of the Gulf Stream wash their microscopic larvae up from tropical southern waters. These lobsters often grow up to two feet in length and specimens have been discovered up to three feet long. While they resemble the clawed lobster, spiny lobsters are not closely related to “true” lobsters. Fossils of the species have been found dating back 110 million years.

The state’s three public aquariums are located at Fort Fisher, at Pine Knoll Shores, and on Roanoke Island. Administered by the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the aquariums are designed to inspire appreciation and conservation of North Carolina’s aquatic environments. General information: www.ncaquariums.com.

The N.C. Aquariums are accredited members of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. AZA and its 200 members are working together to build North America’s largest wildlife conservation movement, by engaging and inspiring 143 million visitors and their communities to care about and take action to help protect wildlife.