

The Next Wave in Herpetariums

By Russ Case

February 27, 2009

Last week I went blogless because I was on vacation in Northern California. My brother, Rob, and I have gotten in the habit of taking a road trip for his birthday, and this year he suggested we head north to visit the Monterey Aquarium. So we packed up my trusty X-box (that would be a Scion XB, the first, boxier model) and hit the road. After a stop in the small town of Nipomo in order to eat at Jocko's, my favorite steak joint and highly recommended to anyone who is traveling along Highway 101 near San Luis Obispo, we eventually landed in Monterey.

It had been years since I visited the Monterey Aquarium. Previously I had found it a fascinating experience, and I did still when I was there last week. An interesting assortment of sea life was on display, everything from weedy sea dragons and playful sea otters – one kept trying to crack open a ball as if it were a clam or oyster -- to innkeeper worms, fat, pulsating pink creatures that inhabit burrows and which resemble an elongated Jabba the Hutt (my video of an innkeeper worm in all its pulsating glory can be seen below).

While wandering the halls of the aquarium among throngs of visiting schoolkids, it occurred to me that someone should open an equivalent attraction geared toward reptiles. I know that zoo herpetariums and other reptile exhibits are out there, but I don't know of any that are on a par with large public aquariums such as the Monterey Aquarium, the Georgia Aquarium, the Shedd Aquarium or the Aquarium of the Pacific. These multimillion-dollar, state-of-the-art facilities are highly publicized and attract many thousands of visitors, and with the increased interest reptiles have been enjoying in recent years, don't you think a reptile version would be just as popular?

I remember hearing a report a few years ago that suggested cities with depressed economies were opening public aquariums to beef up city coffers. I'm not sure whether or not that report was accurate, but with the economy what it is these days, perhaps other cities will be thinking of opening their own aquariums. To them I say, open a public herpetarium instead!

Think of it -- lines of people waiting to enter a fancy new complex featuring beautiful state-of-the-art displays of the world's most interesting reptiles and amphibians all in one place. It might be like all your favorite herpetariums ("snake houses," etc.) from all your favorite zoos, all gathered together under one roof. Instead of a mega-tank with some whale sharks swimming around in it (on view at the Georgia Aquarium – pretty cool), there could be a vast rain forest landscape, planted with lush vegetation and with all the requisite tropical reptiles, from plumed basilisks to poison frogs, inhabiting their separate niches. Vivariums representing the world's herp-inhabited habitats (say that 10 times real fast) could result in eye-boggling displays of hundreds of animals.

Aquariums usually present shows, and so could a city herpetarium. Where an aquarium feeds a tank of fish, perhaps a rain of crickets could be dropped down onto a large desert terrarium featuring bearded dragons or other hungry lizards. Many reptile people give talks at schools featuring live reptiles, and these are always a big hit with kids. So of course such presentations at the public herpetarium would draw big crowds. The possibilities of educational presentations are endless!

I can't help but think that if people are willing to crowd aquariums they would be willing to crowd a huge herpetarium. The Fort Worth Zoo is betting that people will. They're getting ready to open their Museum of Living Art, a new \$18 million

facility devoted to reptiles and amphibians that's scheduled to open this spring. The zoo is referring to it as "the country's most elite herpetarium." It sounds like it'll definitely be worth a visit. Interestingly, according to an article in the Star-Telegram, the new herpetarium is being built on the grounds of an aquarium that was demolished. You can read the article [here](#).

More power to the Fort Worth and other zoos that recognize the tremendous popularity of reptiles and amphibians. It is thanks to them that many people get their first look at different types of living reptiles in the flesh. I would still love to see a reptile-only attraction open to the popular acclaim that public aquariums have enjoyed, attracting the same kinds of crowds. I wonder why this hasn't been done (to my knowledge anyway), and why it's assumed (rightly or otherwise) that people will pay money to look at fish and not reptiles. Could it be because of the stigma that some people still attach to reptiles, the fear that some people still have? Or maybe it's because fish are more active and therefore, in some people's eyes, more interesting to watch? I know it's possible for a beautiful fish tank with swimming fish to weave a hypnotic spell over people who gaze into it. I've kept fish tanks and they're very relaxing to watch; I've drifted off to dreamland in front of many a tank. Because many reptiles tend to remain somewhat inactive, if not hiding completely, you don't get the same effect by watching a reptile enclosure as you do an aquarium with its swaying plants and fish, slowly gliding hither and yon, as the gentle motion lulls you into ... zzzzzzzz.

I think public herpetariums on par with public aquariums would attract throngs of visitors, and nurture an interest even in those who are not already "into" reptiles. Don't you?

Check out some of my vacation pictures below.