



## Animal Profiles

With the expansion of the Journey of Water and the *Restless Planet* galleries, Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center will double its current animal collection, adding thousands of fishes, reptiles, invertebrates and mammals. Below are highlights of some of the unique and fascinating species that will be part of the \$25 million renovation.

### **Komodo Dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*)**

Approximately 760 million years ago, an ancient Virginia volcano blanketed the landscape with volcanic ash and lava. One of *Restless Planet's* habitats mimics the volcanic home of these giant monitor lizards in the Komodo Islands of Indonesia, and features two of the Virginia Aquarium's three Komodo dragons. The largest, Teman, is nearly 6 feet long, while a younger brother-sister pair are each about 3 ½ to 4 feet long. Young Komodo dragons are expert climbers, which is necessary to escape their larger, cannibalistic brethren in the wild. While an adult may grow to 10 feet and hunt pigs or small deer in the wild, these endangered lizards eat a special diet, including rodents and fish, at the Aquarium. Because Komodo dragons require natural light for Vitamin D, both the main exhibit and the holding areas have specially-designed UV-transmitting windows that allow sunlight to reach them.

### **Spotted Eagle Ray (*Aetobatus narinari*)**

These striking rays will soar overhead as visitors stroll through the 100,000 gallon Red Sea aquarium. Their habitat represents the birth of a new ocean, much like Virginia experienced nearly 200 million years ago when the Atlantic Ocean first started to form. Its v-shaped snout and its ability to "fly" completely out of the water when pursued, give these spotted eagle rays its bird-like name. The dramatic spots on its back can be white, yellowish, bluish or even greenish. They eat fish and shellfish, and grow to about 6 feet in length. The spotted eagle ray is found in warm waters throughout the world, and is considered "near threatened" by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). Accidental catch by commercial fishing represents the greatest threat to the spotted eagle ray.

### **Tomistoma (*Tomistoma schlegelii*)**

During the Carboniferous period, Virginia was a steamy peat swamp which later became its vast coal fields. Present-day Malaysia's peat swamps represent an environment similar to that of Virginia's nearly 320 million years ago. Scattered in habitats throughout Malaysia, tomistomas are one of the most endangered reptiles on the planet. The Virginia Aquarium hopes to become directly involved in breeding these animals to support their dwindling wild populations. These large crocodylians feed primarily on fish and small invertebrates, but adult males can grow to nearly 20 feet in length and have been known to take large monkeys and even birds for food.

### **Short-snouted Sea Horse (*Hippocampus hippocampus*)**

During the Silurian period approximately 420 million years ago, the area of Virginia near Blue Grass was much like the Sahara Desert coast of today. This sea horse species will be featured in a North African coastal desert environment. In the wild, the short-snouted sea horse is found in shallow, eel grass beds among dense algae groves. It is noted for its large size and elaborate crown tassels. All *Hippocampus* genus were listed in 2002 Appendix II on the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List. The Virginia Aquarium will be acquiring captive-bred and wild stock from Europe through the EUAC's FAITAG as part of their seahorse conservation initiative, and will require special permitting for shipment to the US. Seahorses are planktivores (plankton-eaters): copepods, nauplii, green water, amphipods, mysis. Compared to the seahorses currently living at the Aquarium, these sea horses are a bit larger. Fully stretched they are about as long as an unsharpened pencil. Male seahorses give birth to fry they brood in belly pouches.

### **Egyptian Cobra (*Haja naja*)**

Reputedly the asp that killed Cleopatra, the Egyptian cobra is extremely venomous and responsible for many deaths because of their widespread distribution (including heavily-populated areas) and because they often enter homes in search of their favorite prey, rats. (The Virginia Aquarium must import antivenom from South Africa and keep it on hand in the event of an accidental staff envenomation.). When in defensive posture, the cobra spreads its hood in an attempt to appear larger and to give warning to those approaching too closely. The Aquarium has already acquired two young cobras that were hatched in Florida, and is seeking a third animal. Cobras grow very quickly and adults can be very large – up to 10 feet in length, but more typically 7-8 feet -- and live for 20 years. A favorite of snake charmers, the cobra cannot actually hear the music: it follows the swaying movements of the charmer's flute.