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Featuring 6,000 New Animals, Virginia Aquarium Opens New *Restless Planet*

Four immersive habitats, new hands-on exhibits, and 110,000 gallons of new aquariums show forces that shaped Virginia to become the landscape it is today

(Virginia Beach, Va., 2009) – The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center will open its new \$25 million *Restless Planet* renovation in 2009, featuring 12,000 square feet of spectacular new habitats, exhibits and aquariums. Home to 6,000 new animals and 367 new species – including Komodo dragons, exotic cobras, hedgehogs, and so much more – *Restless Planet* will more than double the Aquarium’s animal collection.

Restless Planet is the largest project undertaken by the Virginia Aquarium in 13 years. It was designed by Chermayeff & Poole of Boston, architects for the National Aquarium in Baltimore, the New England Aquarium, and several other aquariums around the world. With these changes, the Aquarium is now able to display 700 species and 12,000 individual animals.

Restless Planet features four habitats from around the world that existed in Virginia millions of years ago. Visitors will explore immersive live-animal exhibits and engage in 36 new hands-on activities designed to demonstrate the processes that shaped Virginia’s current landscape. *Restless Planet* will include a Malaysian Peat Swamp, a Coastal Sahara Desert, the Red Sea, and Indonesia’s Flores Island – the same environments and landscapes that Virginia experienced millions of years ago. The habitats will recreate the look, feel and smell of those environments, as well as showcase many of the animals that adapted to those environments.

Slog through the humidity of a Malaysian peat swamp and come face-to-face with tomistomas, the world’s most endangered crocodile. Shuffle through North African desert sands where cobras and scorpions reside. Explore a 40-foot tunnel in the Red Sea while eagle rays with 6-foot wingspans and

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hundreds of colorful reef fishes swim overhead. Then hike across an Indonesian volcanic island in search of Komodo dragons, the world's largest lizards.

In the *Restless Planet's* two Science Shacks, visitors will learn how these exotic habitats relate to Virginia's past through an educational and entertaining mix of experiments, games, and unique artifacts. For example, they can make coal, produce a volcanic eruption, create a new ocean basin, and study 750 million-year-old rocks from Mount Rogers and more recent artifacts from Virginia's coal mining industry.

Children also will love playing the "Puzzled Earth" and "Where in the World" games. In the Conservation Station, visitors will meet live animals up close in a "research tent in the field" setting during daily programs led by the Aquarium's educators.

The following provides more information about the individual *Restless Planet* habitats:

Malaysian Peat Swamp Habitat - Approximately 320 million years ago, vast peat swamps covered parts of Virginia, ultimately leading to large amounts of coal found in the southwestern part of Virginia. Today's swampy coastal regions of Malaysia best represent the type of environment that formed Virginia's extensive, commercial Appalachian coal beds. *Restless Planet* houses this environment's inhabitants such as tomistomas, Malaysian fish, turtles and reptiles; and recreates the swamp with dripping water, rumbling thunder, low-hanging plants and squishy flooring to highlight how Virginia's coal was formed.

Coastal Sahara Desert Habitat - Approximately 430 million years ago, Virginia was the hottest, driest desert that sat on the edge of a shallow sea. The environment created extensive limestone deposits currently found in the western part of the state. Today, a similar environment is found in the Sahara Desert bordering the Mediterranean Sea. *Restless Planet* features many of the inhabitants of this environment such as cobras, desert hedgehogs, scorpions, and short-snouted seahorses.

Red Sea Habitat - Approximately 205 million years ago, Virginia had a front row seat for the formation of the Atlantic Ocean when the continent of Pangea was splitting apart. Today, the Red Sea is rifting. To explain how the Atlantic Ocean was formed, spotted eagle rays with a six-foot wing span and hundreds of exotic tropical fish will be showcased in a 100,000-gallon, 40-foot walk-through tunnel aquarium, which is the largest in Virginia.

Indonesia's Flores Island Habitat - Approximately 760 million years ago, Virginia's tallest mountain was an explosive volcano. Today, Indonesia is home to more volcanoes than any other country and the island of Flores is home to 16 of those volcanoes. *Restless Planet* recreates this volcanic environment to educate guests on how volcanoes are created. The Komodo dragon, the largest lizard on

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the earth, will greet guests through a 4-foot acrylic bubble right inside the dragon's habitat.

In addition to *Restless Planet*, the Virginia Aquarium is also opening new Journey of Water galleries, which follows the descending path of Virginia's watershed from a gentle waterfall in the Upland River Gallery to the near-shore depths of the Chesapeake Bay. A giant holographic globe will show how Virginia and the continent changed over millions of years along with the plants, animals, and fish of today. Children of all ages will enjoy a newly-renovated touch pool with, horseshoe crabs and other ocean critters.

A visit to the newly renovated Virginia Aquarium will educate, engage, and inspire visitors with the world they inhabit while generating awareness of the conservation challenges we face. The Virginia Aquarium is open daily except Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Restless Planet opens in 2009 – so now's the time to plan your Virginia Beach getaway. For travel planning, call 800-VA-BEACH or visit www.vbfun.com. For specific information about the Virginia Aquarium, call 757-385-FISH or visit www.VirginiaAquarium.com.

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