

Illustrated program on the rare coelacanth fish

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NEWS RELEASE

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

SCRIPPS INSTITUTION OF OCEANOGRAPHY LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA 92037 (714) 452-3624

The adventures of an expedition to the Comoro Islands, near Madagascar, to capture a "living fossil"--the rare coelacanth (pronounced see-la-canth) fish--will be shared in an illustrated program, open to the public, at noon, Friday, February 6 (1976), in Sumner Auditorium at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego.

"On the Trail of the Elusive Coelacanth" will be presented by Dr. John E. McCosker, a graduate of Scripps and now superintendent of the Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco, and his wife, Sandra, a cultural anthropologist (ethnologist).

Last year, the husband-and-wife team spent six weeks in the Comoros. Dr. McCosker sought the coelacanth and Ms. McCosker recorded the music and chants of the natives of Grande Comore, one of four Comoro Islands.

At the close of the program, Ms. McCosker, who is associated with the San Francisco Center for Folk Art and a lecturer at San Francisco State University, will play some of her recordings and briefly discuss her research on the development of Grande Comore folk lore and the significance of the coelacanth in the native culture.

Dr. McCosker says the coelacanth fish have lived, almost unchanged, since long before the dinosaur age. They are blue-gray with light flecks, have a tough, armorlike, heavily scaled body, and are ferocious predators with canine teeth and strong jaw muscles that are used to capture prey, which are swallowed whole.

He says it is believed that man has a common ancestor with the coelacanth, which was once a fresh-water creature. He said the coelacanth helps zoologists "turn the clock back" to prehistoric times and provides the missing link between the fins of fishes and the limbs of vertebrates.

The animal's paired, leg-like, paddle-shaped pectoral and pelvic fins can be rotated in a 180-degree arc in any direction to propel the fish, and could probably be used as limbs for crawling. The fin rays are on a muscular, scaled stalk that protrudes from the body and operates much like the limbs of land vertebrates.

Although Dr. McCosker was unable to bring back a living coelacanth for study and exhibition--none have been kept alive--he did obtain two that had been caught by natives and then frozen alive in November, 1973.

One of these specimens, weighing 10 pounds, is now on display in Scripps's aquarium-museum. The facility is free and open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily and is located near Sumner Auditorium on the Scripps campus at 8602 La Jolla Shores Drive, within one-half block of a La Jolla "Route 34" (formerly "R") bus stop.

Fewer than ten U.S. institutions have coelacanths in their collections, including Scripps and Steinhart Aquarium, which received Dr. McCosker's other specimen.

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