

# A Museum Aquarium: The Wonder of Underwater

BY ALEX STARACE



Conservancy of Southwest Florida



Loxahatchee River District's River Center



Loxahatchee River District's River Center

In the deep sea or amongst the coral reef, humans have long been captivated by the remoteness of the aquatic realm. Which is why Mat Roy, the President and COO of Living Color Aquariums in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, has such a fascinating job: His team brings the awe of the underwater to an indoor space. He's also the star of the Nat Geo WILD hit series "Fish Tank Kings," a reality television show based on Living Color's custom aquarium construction. In past issues of *South Florida Opulence*, we've featured Living Color's stunning residential, resort, hotel and spa custom aquariums. In this issue, we spotlight another unique niche: museum aquariums.

## THE ART OF RE-CREATING NATURE

Mat explained that working with museums and nature centers presents unique challenges. Each custom aquarium must exactly re-create a representative section of nature within a relatively small space. "We'll study the local surroundings to understand what is indigenous to a particular area, and then we replicate that specific scenery." The team at Living Color Aquariums includes biologists who collaborate with each facility's experts to build safe, true-to-life environments for the aquatic life.

"Living Color... it's where engineering meets art," said Mat. At the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, for example, Mat's team was tasked with building an alligator exhibit, among other things. "Alligator exhibits are very unique. The challenge is creating a virtual "vertical slice" of the everglades displayed behind acrylic walls. Alligators, of course, need full water submersion and a dry area to relax and bake under the proper lighting, to absorb the needed nutrients, just as they would under the sun."

Making sure that such a complex system works flawlessly 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is not for the faint of heart – especially when one installation includes multiple exhibits – and not just on alligators, but also on turtles, snakes, octopuses and fish. These creatures each need their own individualized environments, depending on whether they live in shallow waters or deep waters, freshwater or saltwater.

*Continued on next page*



*South Florida Science Center and Aquarium in West Palm Beach*

PHOTO COURTESY OF SILVIA PANGARO



*Andrew Nieves of Lake Worth pretends to hold his breath for the camera while in the pop-up aquarium in the South Florida Science Center and Aquarium in West Palm Beach.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF PETER W. CROSS



## THE "KINGS" OF WILD

Such wide-ranging installations are commonplace for Living Color Aquariums. At the South Florida Science Center and Aquarium in West Palm Beach, Mat's team built the story of the region's waterways from an inland local canal system all the way out to a recently sunken industrial freighter ship, which is now home to many of Florida's native marine species. There's even an exhibit on freshwater invasive species, which was featured in an episode of "Fish Tank Kings." But most popular is the "Pop Up" aquarium exhibit, where both kids and adults can crawl underneath an aquarium, and then "pop up" to find themselves in a tube in the middle of a reef, totally surrounded by water and fish. It's something visitors seldom forget.

Another fan favorite is a "touch tank." Mat's crew has installed one at the Loxahatchee River District's River Center. It's a low, shallow tank with an open top. A biologist stands behind it and uses the aquarium as an educational tool. Visitors are invited to touch the friendly aquatic life swimming within the touch tank. One can only imagine how easy it is to get lost in the fun and mystery of underwater life – and to forget that a visit to the aquarium couldn't happen without experts like Mat Roy and the Living Color Aquariums' team behind the scenes. ●

For a tour to see just how the "Fish Tank Kings" at Living Color Aquariums work their magic, call (800) 878-9511 or log onto [www.LivingColor.com](http://www.LivingColor.com). Living Color Aquariums is located at 6850 NW 12th Ave., Fort Lauderdale, Florida.