

Rain forest creation close to the real deal

Four-story exhibit in a glass dome starting to flourish at new Academy of Sciences

By John Upton
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A rain forest is taking root in Golden Gate Park.

In an ambitious effort to re-create tropical rainforests from three continents, the California Academy of Sciences is piecing together a newly flourishing four-story rain forest exhibit inside its new building, home to the Steinhart Aquarium, Kimball Natural History Museum and Morrison Planetarium. The building is scheduled to open Sept. 27.

Bushes and trees were the first wildlife encapsulated inside the building's glass dome — large palms have already grown two feet since they were planted in December, Steinhart Aquarium Director Chris Andrews said.

"I've told the horticulturists in here I don't want things trimmed and pruned — I don't want all the branches looking neat and tidy," Andrews said, stepping carefully between newly planted undergrowth bushes. "I want stuff looking gnarly and chewed with dead stuff and live stuff; I want it looking like a real forest."

An elevator will plunge visitors down to a glass-fronted flooded Amazonian rain forest display, while ramps will wind guests around the dome's interior up to the rain forest's canopy, where light flows from lamps and through skylights.

The exhibit will evolve during the next three to five years as the canopy grows and as vines and mosses smother many of the display's plastic plants, Andrews said.

As the canopy expands in the coming years, it will shade out and kill the smaller plants — just like a real jungle.

"When you walk through a primary rain forest, it's actually very open," he said.

Aquarium staff will fill the dome with captive-bred and wild-caught birds, bats, frogs, lizards and butterflies before its doors swing open to the public, Andrews said. The critters aren't expected to breed



The new California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park is scheduled to open in September.

— Cindy Chew/The Examiner

By the numbers

The rain forest exhibit to open at the California Academy of Sciences

1,600

Animals planned for the dome

600

Flying birds and bats planned

100,000 gallons

Tank size in rain forest exhibit

1.5 million

Expected yearly visitors

\$488 million

Construction-related costs

\$55 million

Yearly operating costs

\$24.95: Adult admission

\$14.95: Child aged 7-11 admission

\$159: Annual family membership

Source: California Academy of Sciences

inside the dome and will need to be replaced when they die, although some of the frogs might reproduce, he said.

Purchasing wild-caught animals from other nations encourages local populations to protect their own habitats, he said.

"It's a very important conservation strategy because we can't simply lock up chunks of nature any more — all of nature is managed," Andrews said.

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