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An edition of
Treasure Coast
News/Press-Tribune

The Jupiter Courier

Florida's No. 1
weekly newspaper,
Florida Press
Association 2007

THE COMMUNITY CHOICE FOR NORTHERN PALM BEACH COUNTY

<http://jupitercourier.com>

SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, 2008

50 cents



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Conrad Ichener of Living Color places some of the ferns and palmettos into the 1,800-gallon aquarium depicting the "Wild and Scenic" area of the Loxahatchee River. It is one of the showcase aquariums at the Loxahatchee River Center designed by Living Color, a custom aquarium company in Fort Lauderdale. The center will officially open on Aug. 23.

River Center about to start flowing

BY KIT BRADSHAW

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Eight aquariums, ranging in size from 1,800 gallons to 175 gallons, will capture the sense, feel and images of the Loxahatchee River when the Loxahatchee River Center debuts on Aug. 23.

It has been a long road from concept to reality.

The building that now houses

the River Center was once occupied by the Loxahatchee River Historical Society.

But this organization and its museum headed north to Lighthouse Park, where it now occupies the former Coast Guard facility.

The 5,000-square-foot building with the blue metal roof at Burt Reynolds Park also had hurri-

cane damage. It had to be repaired before the Loxahatchee River District could upgrade the building to house the thousands of pounds of aquariums, filtering and electrical equipment and the exhibits themselves.

"There were significant challenges with all phases," said Jo-

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LOXAHATCHEE RIVER CENTER

What: Grand opening
When: Saturday, Aug. 23, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Where: Loxahatchee River Center, Burt Reynolds Park, 805 N. U.S. 1, Jupiter

Cost: Free.

Information: www.loxahatchee-river.org/rivercenter

RIVER

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celyn O'Neill, the district's education program coordinator. "The concept was pretty easy, since we knew we wanted to touch on all the major habitats of the river. The design was a long process, to get the aquariums just right and what we would do with each one."

Originally the plan was to phase in the River Center for cost reasons, O'Neill said, but because of efforts by the district, the Loxahatchee River Preservation Initiative and others, the entire \$1 million center will be able to open on Aug. 23.

"The largest aquarium is the first one you see, the (federally designated) Wild and Scenic river. It is an 1,800-gallon freshwater tank that shows the main part of the channel, and is also built up to represent the river bank, with a cypress swamp on one side and a freshwater marsh on the other," O'Neill said.

"The last tank, which is 1,600 gallons, is a saltwater, coral reef deep marine tank. It will give us the 'big finish' to the exhibit, with fabricated corals and real decorative reef fish. I think this one will be a big draw at the center — people will want to just stand there and watch the corals and the fish in this tank."



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With the mural of Loxahatchee River scenery in the background, Conrad Ichener of Living Color, a custom aquarium company in Fort Lauderdale, carefully places the fabricated foliage seen along the river into place in the 1800 gallon freshwater "Wild and Scenic" river aquarium at the new Loxahatchee River Center.

In between the beginning and finishing exhibits are several smaller tanks. There is one with exotic and native species that show the impact the invasive species have on the natives; an estuary system, including an oyster reef and fabricated red mangrove area that will be interactive; a fabricated red mangrove tank, that shows predator and prey fish that would live in this type of environment; a touch tank; a dock piling tank showing the fish and en-

crusting animals that make wood docking areas their home and a seagrass tank with nursery fish.

Living Color from Fort Lauderdale has created the tanks, and the different environments, including the fabricated elements, such as coral, which should never be removed from the ocean.

"They were a good choice for us, since we could see the exhibits in fabrication, and I went down to Lauderdale sever-

al times to make sure everything was going as we had envisioned," said O'Neill. "It is truly amazing. It is very realistic and turned out better than we had imagined."

The River Center will be open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. for the grand opening event. After that, it will be open Tuesday through Saturday, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Donations would be appreciated.