



# AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

**Media Inquiries:**

Kendra Snyder, Department of Communications  
212-496-3419, [ksnyder@amnh.org](mailto:ksnyder@amnh.org)  
[www.amnh.org](http://www.amnh.org)

---

November 2016

## *¡CUBA!* OPENS AT THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

### NEW EXHIBITION EXPLORES THE ISLAND'S RICH BIODIVERSITY AND CULTURE

Cuba is a place of exceptional biodiversity and cultural richness, and now a new **bilingual exhibition** at the American Museum of Natural History will offer visitors fresh insights into this island nation just 94 miles from Florida's shores. With a close look at Cuba's unique natural history, including its native species, highly diverse ecosystems, and geology, *¡Cuba!* also explores Cuba's history, traditions, and contemporary Cuban voices to inspire novel perspectives on this dynamic country. *¡Cuba!* opens for a weekend of Member previews on Friday, November 18, and will be on view from Monday, November 21, 2016, to August 13, 2017.

"American Museum of Natural History scientists have worked in collaboration with colleagues in Cuba for many decades, studying the extraordinary biological diversity and endemism of this island nation," said Ellen V. Futter, President of the American Museum of Natural History. "We are delighted now to work in collaboration with the National Natural History Museum in Havana in a groundbreaking partnership to present this major exhibition exploring Cuba's amazing and unique nature and culture, especially at a time when cultural understanding and education are critically important."

Technically an archipelago of more than 4,000 islands and keys, Cuba is the largest island nation in the Caribbean – and one of the region's most ecologically diverse countries. About 50 percent of its plants and 32 percent of its vertebrate animals are endemic, meaning they are found only on the island. The exhibition will include cultural artifacts, as well as live animals, specimens, and lifelike models representing the island's distinctive wildlife, from a venomous mammal to the world's smallest bird. Biodiversity displays were

developed in close collaboration with scientists at the **Cuban National Museum of Natural History** (Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Cuba, **MNHN**). Highlights include a recreation of the Zapata wetlands, home to the endangered Cuban crocodile, and a reconstructed cave environment where visitors can examine fossil remains of a giant ground sloth once common to the island.

The exhibition opens with life-sized portraits of modern Cubans paired with short excerpts from interviews, offering a chorus of voices – from Cuba and abroad, young and old, urban and rural, pragmatic and optimistic. A long, open boulevard evoking the street life one might find in a Cuban city will invite visitors to discover Cuban culture through music, games, and a variety of interactive experiences. Other highlights include a pair of altars celebrating orisha religion, an Afro-Cuban spiritual tradition also known as Santería; a gallery showcasing contemporary Cuban art; and a display on the cultivation of one of Cuba’s most famous crops, tobacco. An introductory film about Cuba’s history – including its first peoples, slavery, sugar industry, and the 1959 revolution – will provide visitors with historical context for contemporary realities.

The American Museum of Natural History has long collaborated with Cuban scientists at a number of institutions, including the MNHN, the University of Havana, the Cuban Botanical Society, and the National Enterprise for the Protection of Flora and Fauna. Museum scientists have led and participated in nearly 30 expeditions and field projects to Cuba over the last 124 years (*see release on the history of the American Museum of Natural History in Cuba*).

Building on this long legacy, the Museum recently launched a new research collaboration with Cuba under the banner of **Explore21** – a comprehensive Museum initiative that began in 2013 to foster a series of innovative scientific expeditions to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. In the fall of 2015, the **Explore21 Expedition to Cuba** sent a team of Museum and Cuban scientists to Alejandro de Humboldt National Park, one of the most remote and biologically important areas of the country, to advance the understanding of Cuban biodiversity, its evolution, biogeography, and conservation. *¡Cuba!* will feature footage from the expedition’s survey.

“The Museum has a long and fascinating history of collaboration with Cuba,” said Michael Novacek, the Museum’s senior vice president and provost for science.

“Notwithstanding the active history of expeditionary work, there is still much to discover and understand about the Cuban biota, a mission that has become especially urgent in light of what could be an upsurge in development and industrialization of the island in coming years.”

The U.S. and Cuba share ecosystems and biodiversity, and face shared environmental challenges. For example, Cuba, which is located just 94 miles south of Florida, provides important wintering habitats for more than 280 bird species that breed in the United States. The two countries share 49 animal species and eight plant species that are characterized as “globally threatened” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. And invasive species, like the red lionfish, prey on the native fish and disrupt ecosystems ranging from waters off of North Carolina all the way down to the Caribbean.

“We share environments and environmental interests,” said *¡Cuba!* co-curator Ana Luz Porzecanski, director of the American Museum of Natural History’s Center for Biodiversity and Conservation. “Cuba’s nature has been protected both because of historical circumstance and because Cubans themselves have been very committed to protecting their biodiversity. Collaborations in education and research are critical, as they underpin conservation efforts and shape a sustainable vision of the future.”

*¡Cuba!* will look at the environmental challenges the country faces, as well as the many effective conservation laws and measures in place to preserve its unique landscape. As the political and economic relationship between the U.S. and Cuba continues to evolve, the exhibition aims to promote visitor understanding of Cuba’s history as well as its future.

“We really want to surprise our visitors with details about Cuba that they’ve never thought about before,” said *¡Cuba!* co-curator Chris Raxworthy, curator-in-charge of the American Museum of Natural History’s Department of Herpetology. “We hope this exhibition relays an understanding of who the people of Cuba are, how the island nation is biologically unique, how it is connected to the world, and what it’s like to live in Cuba now.”

## **A STROLL IN THE CITY**

Cuba’s city streets have been shaped by the country’s history as a Spanish colony

and by the enormous wealth created by the sugar industry beginning in the early 1800s. In Havana, Cienfuegos, Camagüey, and many other Cuban cities, stately plazas and grand boulevards are lined with colonnades—covered walkways with graceful arches and columns inspired by Renaissance Europe and ancient Greece and Rome. These airy, multicolored arcades offer protection from the elements as well as open space for community life. The *¡Cuba!* exhibition features a long, open city boulevard emulating a street you might find in Cuba. Tables lining the exhibition’s street encourage visitors to try their hand at Cuban dominos, which, unlike American dominos, have tiles with up to nine dots; enjoy the aroma of a cup of Cuban coffee, called a *cafecito*; listen to music you might find on a Cuban radio station today, ranging from classical to rock; and check out Cuba’s 16 baseball teams.

A **1955 Chevrolet Bel Air** on display at the beginning of the exhibition’s boulevard reveals the story behind the vintage cars that famously rumble down Cuban streets. From 1959 until recently, the Cuban state tightly restricted car imports and sales. At the same time, the United States’ embargo banned most exports to Cuba, including car parts, so Cubans have found ingenious ways to keep old cars running, despite a shortage of spare parts.

## NATURE

*¡Cuba!* explores the extraordinary biodiversity found in the island’s remote forests, mysterious caves, expansive wetlands, and dazzling reefs through immersive exhibits that have been developed with colleagues at MNHN.

The mountainous area of eastern Cuba that includes **Alejandro de Humboldt National Park** (named for Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt) is among the most biologically diverse island sites on the planet—and is now carefully protected. In the exhibition, visitors will learn about some of the rare animals that live there: the mammal *Solenodon cubanus*, known in Cuba as the *almiquí*, which secretes venomous saliva through a groove in its front teeth and was once thought extinct, and the bee hummingbird (*Mellisuga helenae*), which at about 1/20th of an ounce is the smallest bird in the world—smaller than many bees. **A film about the Museum’s 2015 expedition** to the park will be on view in the exhibition. Visitors also will see species of live reptiles and amphibians, including the

**Cuban boa** (*Chilabothrus angulifer*), the **Cuban tree frog** (*Osteopilus septentrionalis*), which produces toxic mucus that irritates people's eyes, and six different species of tree-dwelling lizards called **anoles**. A Cuban anole is also highlighted in the artwork created by **Cuban artist Michele Miyares Hollands** for the exhibition's advertising campaign.

Cuba is pitted with caves, created over millions of years as water dissolved underground limestone. Hidden from view, shielded from the elements, caves harbor tantalizing traces of Cuba's past. Although the written record of Cuba's people begins in 1492, its caves reveal evidence of a human prehistory thousands of years long. Based on artifacts preserved in those caves, some of which are on display in *¡Cuba!*, scientists have evidence that people came to the island in a number of waves starting 6,000 or more years ago and may have had their origins in Central America, in South America, or even North America. Cave deposits also reveal that Cuba once had its own unique set of land animals, many of which are now extinct, including giant sloths and an **extinct giant owl**, *Ornimegalonyx*, the largest owl that ever lived. The exhibition features a life-sized model of this 39-inch-tall bird. A variety of interactive exhibits – including one that explores landmass changes and sea-level rise over deep time and a “hidden animals” game that invites players to search for Cuban wildlife in its natural habitat – lets visitors discover more about Cuba's geology and biodiversity.

On the southwest side of Cuba, the Zapata peninsula contains the largest and most important wetlands in the Caribbean. Covering 1.5 million acres, the immense Zapata Biosphere Reserve includes marshes, peat bogs, mangroves, coral reefs, and forests that support a complex web of life, including frogs, turtles, fish, shellfish, birds, and countless plants and insects, making its conservation a top priority for the entire region. An immersive walk-through reconstruction of this reserve will introduce the exhibition's visitors to these animals, including the two species of crocodiles that live in Cuba: the **Cuban crocodile** (*Crocodylus rhombifer*) and the **American crocodile** (*Crocodylus acutus*). Both have suffered steep declines from overhunting and habitat loss. But with only a few thousand individuals remaining, the Cuban crocodile has the smallest population, and the smallest geographical range, of any crocodile. The Zapata wetlands are the only place where significant numbers of this critically endangered species still live in the wild. Since 1999, a team of U.S. and Cuban scientists led by George Amato, director of the Sackler

Institute for Comparative Genomics at the American Museum of Natural History, have been working in Zapata and Wildlife Refuge Monte Cabaniguán on a long-term study of the evolution and conservation of the two crocodile species.

Not far from the main island of Cuba, along a string of jewel-like keys called **Gardens of the Queen**, silvery fish zip past banks of coral studded with colorful starfish, sea fans, and sponges. To protect this vital diversity, Cuba has created the largest marine reserve in the Caribbean. Coral reefs are some of the richest ecosystems on Earth, and on many Caribbean coastlines, they are in danger of disappearing. But in this protected area in Cuba, the reef is wonderfully alive. An open coral reef diorama in *¡Cuba!* showcases some of that life, including **hawksbill turtles** (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), which nest on beaches in Gardens of the Queen, and **spotted eagle rays** (*Aetobatus narinari*), which move between Cuba and the coasts of Florida and Mexico.

## CULTURE

Cuba is home to more than 11 million people, who can trace their ancestry to indigenous people, Spanish colonists, African slaves, and immigrants from the Philippines, China, Europe, the Canary Islands, Jamaica and Haiti. A wide variety of religious traditions coexist in Cuba, and in recent decades, their role in Cuban society has grown. In the early years of the Cuban Revolution, the government declared Cuba an atheist state and suppressed organized religion. But new constitutions in 1976 and especially 1992 recognize the right to religious freedom. Today, many churches and temples in Cuba maintain strong ties with congregations in the United States and other countries. Cubans from many different walks of life find inspiration in **orisha religion**, a spiritual practice with West African roots often called Regla de Ocha, or **Santería**. Those who follow this path seek guidance from orishas, sacred beings who reign over human endeavors and the forces of nature. Ceremonies take place inside a home, rather than a public temple or church. To honor the orishas, practitioners sometimes create elaborate altars or “thrones” – sacred spaces that present these powerful beings in regal splendor. Two such thrones were created especially for display in the exhibition.

When Spanish sailors first explored Cuba in 1492, they returned with accounts of tall forests, chattering birds, and men and women going from place to place “with a firebrand

of weeds in their hands to take in the fragrant smoke.” Before long, Spanish colonists were growing and smoking tobacco, too. As the demand for tobacco spread, the “weeds” became a profitable crop, powered by the labor of African slaves who also made possible the lucrative trade in coffee and especially sugar. Cuba opened its first cigar factories in the early 1800s. Today, cigars are still one of Cuba’s leading exports, with around 100 million handcrafted and shipped around the world every year. To plant, tend, and prepare fine tobacco for Cuban cigars, farmers use exacting methods passed down over generations. Working meticulously, they pick leaves one by one, string them along wooden poles, and hang them in sheds with vents that can open and close to control temperature and humidity. Visitors can see a replica of one of these sheds in the exhibition. Over weeks, the leaves cure, losing water and turning from bright green to soft brown. Professional rollers called *torcedores* make each cigar by combining leaves from different varieties of tobacco. Cigars are sorted by color, checked for flaws, and then boxed for sale.

Perhaps best known as the birthplace of rhythmic dances like the mambo and the cha-cha, Cuba is also home to a rich ballet tradition and film making – and a broader art scene that is dynamic and constantly evolving. The Cuban government has supported the arts through specialized schools, galleries, concert halls and many other cultural institutions and programs, but it has also limited some artistic expression. Since the 1990s, reforms have allowed artists to travel abroad and sell their work more freely, and today, many Cuban artists collaborate with artists outside Cuba and display or perform their work on the global stage. In *¡Cuba!*, visitors will see a large collection of original posters created in the last decade by a new generation of Cuban artists. Most of the artworks on display were commissioned by government-run cultural institutions to advertise plays, films, festivals, and concerts, but recent years have also seen a blossoming of art and design as a autonomous and independent enterprise. The exhibition also includes an **interactive art “gallery”** – a room where visitors can choose paintings, sculptures, or performance art created by Cuban artists to be projected on the walls.

#### EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION

*¡Cuba!* will be open to the public from Monday, November 21, 2016, to August 13, 2017. Museum Members will be able to preview the exhibition on Friday, November 18,

Saturday, November 19, and Sunday, November 20.

The exhibition is designed and produced by the American Museum of Natural History's award-winning Exhibition Department under the direction of David Harvey, senior vice president for exhibition. *¡Cuba!* is co-curated by Dr. Ana Luz Porzecanski, director of Museum's Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, and Dr. Chris Raxworthy, curator-in-charge in the Museum's Department of Herpetology.

*¡Cuba!* was developed in collaboration with the Cuban National Museum of Natural History.

Major funding for *¡Cuba!* has been provided by the **Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Endowment Fund**.

Significant support for *¡Cuba!* has been provided by the Ford Foundation.

Generous support for *¡Cuba!* has been provided by the Dalio Ocean Initiative.

*¡Cuba!* is proudly supported by JetBlue.

#### **EXPLORER**

*¡Cuba!* is featured in the Museum's recently re-launched [Explorer app](#), developed with support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, which lets visitors think like an explorer by personalizing their onsite experience using cutting-edge location-aware technology to provide unique journeys through the Museum's 45 permanent halls.

#### **AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY (AMNH.ORG)**

The American Museum of Natural History, founded in 1869, is one of the world's preeminent scientific, educational, and cultural institutions. The Museum encompasses 45 permanent exhibition halls, including the Rose Center for Earth and Space and the Hayden Planetarium, as well as galleries for temporary exhibitions. It is home to the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial, New York State's official memorial to its 33rd governor and the nation's 26th president, and a tribute to Roosevelt's enduring legacy of conservation. The Museum's five active research divisions and three cross-disciplinary centers support approximately 200 scientists, whose work draws on a world-class permanent collection of more than 33 million specimens and artifacts, as well as specialized collections for frozen



tissue and genomic and astrophysical data, and one of the largest natural history libraries in the world. Through its Richard Gilder Graduate School, it is the only American museum authorized to grant the Ph.D. degree and the Master of Arts in Teaching degree. Annual attendance has grown to approximately 5 million, and the Museum's exhibitions and Space Shows can be seen in venues on five continents. The Museum's website and apps for mobile devices extend its collections, exhibitions, and educational programs to millions more beyond its walls. Visit [amnh.org](http://amnh.org) for more information.

**Follow**

Become a fan of the American Museum of Natural History on Facebook at [facebook.com/naturalhistory](https://facebook.com/naturalhistory), follow us on Instagram at [@AMNH](https://www.instagram.com/AMNH), Tumblr at [amnhnyc](https://amnhnyc.tumblr.com/), or Twitter at [twitter.com/AMNH](https://twitter.com/AMNH).

# # #

No. 107.1