AMERICAN MUSEUM of NATURAL HISTORY

Media Inquiries: Kristin Elise Phillips, Department of Communications
212-496-3419; kphillips@amnh.org
www.amnh.org

August 2010

SEEKING FISH IN THE HEART OF THE CONGO

ICHTHYOLOGIST AND CURATOR MELANIE STIASSNY'S BLOG IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES* SEARCHES FOR ANSWERS IN UNCHARTED WATERS

Melanie Stiassny (J. Black) and a tiger fish from the Congo River (J. Lowenstein).

Now readers of *The New York Times* can travel with Melanie Stiassny, the Axelrod Research Curator in the Department of Ichthyology at the American Museum of Natural History, to the world's second largest river basin. Stiassny is blogging for *The New York Times's* "Scientist At Work: Notes from the Field" (scientistatwork.blogs.nytimes.com) while surveying the fishes in remote tributaries of the Congo River. But first she had to get there, and the journey is not an easy one.

"Plans are shaping up well," Stiassny writes in the first posting, dated August 10. "With any luck we will be leaving early tomorrow morning, hitching a ride on WWF's speedboat, which is making a two-day journey upriver to the small settlement of Tshumbiri on the main channel of the middle Congo River. From there we will travel some 30 miles by "road" to the WWF's Malebo field station. I say "road" because the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country the size of western Europe, only has a few hundred kilometers of paved roads outside the cities. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

Stiassny has spent the last four years surveying the Lower Congo River as part of The Congo Project, funded in part by the National Science Foundation (research.amnh.org/vz/ichthyology/congo/index.html). This stretch of river has extremely complex hydrology that can wall off populations of fish into what amount to islands in the water, and Stiassny's morphological and genetic research of these fish show that this stretch of river is one of the most diverse, in terms of fish, in the world, home to more than 300 species.

On this trip, Stiassny is heading upriver with colleagues to look for the source of the diversity downriver. She and her team will be searching the Malebo area for the fish in two different tributary systems of the Congo River, one that drains directly into the main channel and another that drains into the Kasai River. In short, Stiassny is looking for the populations that seeded the diversity in the Lower Congo, searching for answers in an area that has never been surveyed scientifically.

"Apparently, despite a regular appearance in stewing pots all over the region, the fishes of these waters have never been explored ichthyologically," writes Stiassny in the blog. "Time to change that."

For additional information, see Stiassny in the Lower Congo in the video "Evolution in Action" from the Museum's Science Bulletins (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tObYa9KQb8w).

# # #

No. 121