AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

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THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY ANNOUNCES *THE POWER OF POISON*

SPECIAL EXHIBITION ON DEADLY, POWERFUL, EVEN LIFESAVING POISON OPENS NOVEMBER 16, 2013

The American Museum of Natural History announces *The Power of Poison*, a new exhibition that explores poison's paradoxical roles in nature, human health and history, literature, and myth. Whether as a defense against predators, a source of magical strength, or a lethal weapon used as lifesaving medical treatment, the story of poison is surprising at every turn. Inviting visitors to explore some of history's most puzzling poisoning cases, the exhibition also includes an interactive section where eyewitness accounts and clues can be used to solve poisoning mysteries and a theater where live presenters share dramatic stories of poisonings and forensic detection.

Ubiquitous in the natural world, poison can be found in the brightly hued longwing butterflies of Central and South America or the seemingly innocuous skin of a mango in a New York City kitchen. In both cases, the toxins are part of a dynamic defense system that plants and animals deploy against predators. (In fact, many familiar foods we encounter daily—cinnamon, chili peppers, coffee, and tea—owe their taste, smell, or stimulant effects to defensive chemicals that can be toxic in large doses.) Examining a variety of evolutionary strategies—including the linked escalations in the strength of a predator's poison and the resistance of its prey—the exhibition will highlight many toxic species, including live golden poison frogs, in a walk-through diorama of Colombia's dense Chocó lowland forest.

Humans have long marveled at the secrets of poisons and sought to detect their

presence and protect against their toxic powers, as many fascinating artifacts on view will reveal. Prized objects included celadon dishes, believed to detect poisons; fossilized shark teeth, thought to be dragon tongues that could "purify" food of deadly compounds; and fossilized sea animals called crinoids, believed to be antidotes to common poisons.

For millennia, plant and animal toxins also have been used in treatments for a myriad of medical conditions. Studying how poisons affect human cells also helps scientists figure out how to protect, repair, and heal them. For example, yew trees are so poisonous that eating a handful of needles can kill a person, yet a compound found in the bark has been proven to be an effective anti-cancer agent. The search for new medicines has barely begun, with thousands of toxins now being studied as potentially lifesaving treatments.

The pursuit of poison's toxic powers is at the heart of countless fairy tales and legends from around the world. The exhibition features several, from the myth of Hercules and the Hydra, animated and projected onto ceramic Greek urns, to life-sized dioramas of famous stories, including the trio of witches in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Others, such as the diorama illustrating the traditional tale of China's first emperor ingesting mercury to gain immortality, attest to the fascination with poisons across place and time.

A gallery of history's most mysterious poisonings, from Cleopatra's legendary snakebite to Napoleon's alleged death by arsenic, leads visitors into the Detecting Poison theater. Here presenters use props, animations, and audience volunteers, to explore a real-world poisoning case that highlights the dramatic advances in toxicology and forensics since the 19th century. Next, visitors encounter large-scale tableaux of other puzzling cases and can solve the mysteries using an iPad game. For instance, visitors may discover what poisoned Captain James Cook and two naturalists aboard Cook's ship in 1774.

The Power of Poison will open on November 16, 2013, and remain on view until August 10, 2014. The exhibition is curated by Mark Siddall, curator in the Division of Invertebrate Zoology, whose research focuses on the evolution of leeches and their

blood-feeding behavior. Dr. Siddall is also the curator of the Museum's *Picturing Science* exhibition, currently on view in the Akeley Gallery.

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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 200 scientists, whose work draws on a world-class permanent collection of more than 32 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 Western Hemisphere. Through its Richard Gilder Graduate School, it is the only American museum authorized to grant the Ph.D. degree. In 2012, the Museum began offering a pilot Master of Arts in Teaching program with a specialization in Earth science. Approximately 5 million visitors from around the world came to the Museum last year, and its exhibitions and Space Shows can be seen in venues on five continents. The Museum's website and collection of apps for mobile devices extend its collections, exhibitions, and educational programs to millions more beyond its walls. Visit amnh.org for more information.

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