

Johnny Morris
WONDERS OF WILDLIFE
NATIONAL MUSEUM &
AQUARIUM

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**“America’s Best Aquarium” Celebrates First Anniversary
Confirms an Astonishing 1.6 Million Visitors in First Full Year of Operation**

Johnny Morris’ Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium celebrates first year by announcing attendance milestone, significant expansion plans and new additions



Springfield, Mo. – Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium is celebrating its one-year anniversary thanks in part to the 1.6 million visitors who have experienced the immersive conservation attraction since its grand opening last September. In honor of its first anniversary, the not-for-profit museum and aquarium also unveiled plans for a significant expansion and an awe-inspiring 5,000-pound bronze black marlin. Unprecedented in scale and scope, Wonders of Wildlife was created by noted conservationist and Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris as a gift to the nation in the heartland of America to inspire people of all ages to engage with the natural world. Located in Morris’ hometown of Springfield, Missouri, the attendance figure ranks Wonders of Wildlife amongst major institutions like Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History and others.

“We are very grateful and humbled to everyone who has experienced Wonders of Wildlife and who shares our conservation mission,” said Johnny Morris. “Wonders of Wildlife is an inspirational and ever-changing tribute to the hunters, anglers and conservationists who helped discover, develop and preserve the nation we love. We proudly welcome everyone to come connect with wildlife and get inspired about conservation.”

The attendance milestone comes after a string of high-profile awards, including being voted “America’s Best New Attraction” and the “Best Aquarium in North America” by *USA TODAY* readers. In addition to ongoing

national recognition, the not-for-profit aquarium is quickly establishing itself as a must-see tourist attraction in the heartland of America. The excitement is directly contributing to the local and regional economy, having a major impact on tourism since opening last fall.

“Missouri is incredibly blessed to have this world-class attraction from native son Johnny Morris, who continues to give back to his hometown and the state he loves,” said Missouri Governor Mike Parson. “These impressive attendance figures underscore the impact Wonders of Wildlife is making on tourism by drawing new visitors and families to the great state of Missouri.”

From the walls of the Smithsonian to Wonders of Wildlife



As part of the first anniversary celebration, Wonders of Wildlife also announced significant expansion plans. Thanks in-part to a generous 15-million dollar donation from FedEx and its founder Fred Smith, a new exhibition hall will be home to the Windland Smith Rice International Awards and its annual Nature’s Best Photography exhibition, previously only displayed at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.

Created to recognize and display the creative talents and documentary achievements of nature photographers at all levels of experience worldwide, the exhibition will feature a rotating gallery of jaw-dropping wildlife photography and video from around the world as a celebration of both people and nature. Named in memory of Windland Smith Rice, an accomplished wildlife photographer, conservation advocate and the late daughter of FedEx CEO Fred Smith, the annual awards and exhibition has become one of the most prestigious and recognized photo competitions in the world.

The new space will link the Aquarium lobby with the main entrance to the Wildlife Galleries. To access the exhibit, guests will ascend an escalator through a pride of lions to reach the 10,000-square-foot gallery space featuring skylights and vaulted ceilings. The expansion is expected to open in 2019.

Massive two-story marlin sculpture finds its way from Australia’s Great Barrier Reef to Springfield, Mo.

To beckon guests upon their arrival to the main aquarium entrance at Wonders of Wildlife, Wonders of Wildlife officials unveiled a massive two-story tall black marlin sculpture. An adventure in the making, the one-of-a-kind 5,000-pound *Cairns Black Marlin 50th Anniversary Bronze Sculpture* made the journey from Australia to the heartland of America and its new home in Springfield, Missouri.

The black marlin represents a pinnacle for sports anglers – a supreme challenge and cherished prize for those who land them. The bronze sculpture depicts a black marlin leaping out of the water at the center of a circular fountain, reflecting conservationist and Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris' vision for the attraction as a tribute to the sportsmen and women of America.

"We are honored to add this remarkable icon that represents the dreams of anglers everywhere," said Johnny Morris. "This sculpture captures the power and beauty of the black marlin and sets the stage for visitors as they begin a journey that celebrates anglers and their significant contributions to conservation."

An angler's dream catch

The marlin sculpture was first commissioned to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the capture of the first 1,000-pound black marlin by Captain George Bransford and deck hand Richard Obach in the Coral Sea off Cairns, Australia. Bransford had first visited Cairns as a paratrooper during World War II and quickly became fascinated with the ocean and aquatic life, particularly the black marlin, known as one of the largest and most elusive billfish on the planet.

Bransford followed his dream and moved his family to Cairns in 1963 to fish the black marlin. On September 25, 1966, his dream came true as he brought in a 1,064-pound black marlin on 80-pound line, setting a new world record. The catch helped put Cairns on the map as a premier destination for sports anglers.

Renowned game fish artist Craig Smith was fishing on the Great Barrier Reef with Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris when conversations about creating a bronze for Wonders of Wildlife began. Smith created the sculpture celebrating Bransford's historic catch, applying his vast experience with the species to create a design that captures the majestic black marlin in action. His design was produced by the Melbourne-based Fundere Studio Foundry, known for monumental sculptures in Australia's capital and throughout the country, as well as sporting venues around the world.

The sculpture was first installed at the Cairns marina in 2016, but quickly caught the attention of Johnny Morris who endeavoured to bring it to Springfield where it could be admired and celebrated by everyone who visits Wonders of Wildlife for generations to come.

Celebration of craftsmanship

The marlin sculpture complements the existing *Dream Buck*, a 26-foot-tall sculpture believed to be the world's largest bronze statue of a mammal. Created by outdoor enthusiast and artist Dick Idol, *Dream Buck* welcomes guests at the start of the Wildlife Galleries and is among the significant collection of wildlife-inspired artwork and craftsmanship found throughout Wonders of Wildlife.

More than 2,000 painters, sculptors, woodworkers, iron workers, taxidermists, illustrators, designers, scientists, biologists, engineers and others contributed to the not-for-profit museum and aquarium, which is home to some of the most sophisticated life-support systems in the country as well as some of the largest and most elaborate nature-based artwork ever created. The largest immersive attraction of its kind in the world, Wonders of Wildlife's massive size called for an expansive team who spent more than nine years creating elaborate details that make the experience rewarding for visitors.

Celebrating hunters and anglers

With a mission to celebrate those who hunt, fish, and act as stewards of the land and water, the 350,000-square-foot Wonders of Wildlife experience is home to dazzling displays that tell the story of the importance of protecting wildlife and habitat, featuring contributions from more than 40 leading national conservation organizations. Fans of the not-for-profit museum and aquarium cite the over-the-top multisensory habitats, engaging interactive exhibits and strong conservation ethic as defining features that set Wonders of Wildlife apart.

“It’s astounding to think that a museum in Springfield, Missouri could attract 1.6 million visitors – numbers that are typically achieved by prominent institutions in major metro areas,” said National Wildlife Federation CEO Collin O’Mara. “Through over the top creativity to connect visitors with amazing wildlife and immersive habitats from around the world, WOW showcases the conservation story better than anywhere else. Every family should visit America’s Conservation Capital so they too can share in this unforgettable experience.”

In addition to unveiling Penguin Cove, new flamingo habitat and hosting temporary exhibits like *Portraits of Courage* and *Year of the Bird*, Wonders of Wildlife will commemorate its first anniversary celebration with free visitor activities taking place all weekend long on September 21 – 23 in honor of National Hunting and Fishing Day. For more information visit www.wondersofwildlife.org.

About Johnny Morris’ Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium

Johnny Morris’ Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium consists of an all-new 1.5-million-gallon Aquarium Adventure showcasing 35,000 live fish, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and birds, and immersive Wildlife Galleries that bring visitors eye-to-eye with the greatest collection of record-setting game animals ever assembled. Created by noted conservationist and Bass Pro Shops founder/CEO Johnny Morris, the 350,000-square-foot experience celebrates those who hunt, fish, and act as stewards of the land and water. Located next to Bass Pro Shops National Headquarters in Springfield, Missouri the campus is a centerpiece of America’s Conservation Capital in Missouri’s Ozark Mountains. Wonders of Wildlife has been voted “Best New Attraction in America” and “America’s Best Aquarium” by the readers of *USA TODAY*. For more information, visit www.wondersofwildlife.org.

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