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Aquarium gets its cyberfeet wet with audio, video tours

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By David Filipov, Globe Staff | November 23, 2008

Truman the octopus can unlock a box and slither through a tiny hole the size of his beak. Right whales hang out in a singles bar off the coast of Nova Scotia. And 400-pound Goliath groupers make a deep roaring sound that could scare the mask off the bravest diver.

These are just a few of the oceanic insights soon to be available to visitors of the New England Aquarium, through a cutting-edge service that will allow guests to download audio and video tours onto their iPods or BlackBerries. The aquarium plans in the coming weeks to trot out their "mobile guide," which will give visitors the opportunity to watch high-definition videos of animals in their natural habitats and glean information about the exhibits that a casual viewer might otherwise miss.

The aquarium says it is the first cultural institution in New England to use mobile guides, which users can personalize the way they program music, allowing them to go at their own pace, skip the exhibits they don't like (so long, jellyfish!), or even watch the whole thing anywhere they can take their MP3 player or personal digital assistant.

It's a huge advancement of the taped audio tours offered by many museums. It's also another sign of the growing dominance of mobile digital devices in public places. And it raises the question: Why trot out video tours that glue visitors' eyes to their iPods when the whole point of going to an aquarium is to see live creatures? And will people stop paying for a ticket if they can download the mobile guides for free and watch them on their computer through iTunes?

William Spitzer, vice president of programs, exhibits, and planning for the aquarium, doubts the new technology will make people stop coming. Instead, he said, the aquarium is hoping it might entice more people to come by.

"It doesn't really compete with the real thing," Spitzer said Thursday. "It adds value to the tour."

Aquarium officials recognize that many visitors eschew guided tours, he said, and therefore overlook some of the most interesting facts about the marine animals swimming around the tanks. And they realize that these days, just about everyone is carrying some sort of digital device.

"We're trying to get people to look more closely at the exhibits," he said. "Maybe they'll pay attention to animals they might not have before. There's a whole aquarium viewers never see."

That unseen experience was revealed during a trial run of the mobile guides Spitzer arranged for a reporter and several visitors.

Mobile tour-takers learn that Truman the octopus can squeeze through a 4-inch hole, even though he is estimated to be between 4 feet and 5 feet long. (It's hard to measure a live octopus because it won't stop squirming.) This extreme flexibility, plus the high level of intelligence displayed by octopi, once allowed a female named Flo to escape from her tank, crawl across the floor, climb into another tank and devour several flounder before she was apprehended by astounded aquarium officials. The narrator of the video describes

how Truman figures out how to unlock the box in his tank where his keepers put his food.

It was tempting to stay glued to the iPod during this Truman show: The actual octopus was hiding motionlessly in a corner of his tank.

The video clip about right whales sheds light on the lives of these giant creatures, represented in the aquarium only by the skeleton of a baby whale that hangs from the ceiling, often unnoticed. The clip shows how researchers painstakingly detailed the social lives of these leviathans, which can grow up to 55 feet long. Right whales find their mates in "the singles bar," in Roseway Basin, off Nova Scotia, the narrator says; he calls the Bay of Fundy, where they raise their young, the "nursery."

"I think it's fascinating," said Tiffany Hepner, 23, of Portland, Ore., who was testing the mobile guide on an iPod provided by aquarium officials. "It points out more things than you would normally get."

Visitors will need to know about the site before they arrive. Visitors who haven't downloaded the mobile guides in advance will be able to get an audio version by dialing special numbers from their cellphones inside the aquarium.

Without the mobile guide, visitors would probably not hear the roaring boom of the goliath grouper or learn that Judith, the 300-pound sand tiger shark, is usually gentle despite her fearsome rows of teeth.

And the right whale would remain a mystery, as it did for the little boy who asked his mother about the hanging skeleton.

"Yeah, that's a big skeleton," she said. "I don't know what it is, though."

Users can download clips for free from www.neaq.org/insider. The files are compatible with most MP3 and MP4 players and PDAs and come in Spanish, Portuguese, and closed captioning.

David Filipov can be reached at filipov@globe.com. ■