UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

★ news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE — Evans - 343-5634

For Release on Receipt — FEATURE MATERIAL

SPAIN OFFERS DONATION TO NEW AQUARIUM

Spain has become the first foreign country to offer a contribution for the National Fisheries Center and Aquarium to be constructed in Washington, D. C., the Department of the Interior announced. The contribution will be a species never before exhibited alive in this country.

William Hagen, Acting Director of the Center, said the Spanish Inland Fish and Game Service will donate living specimens of the Mediterranean cuttlefish, an Old World relative of the octopus and squid. The offer came from Maximiliano Elegido, Director of Fisheries.

The cuttlefish has been well known from ancient times as a producer of dark brown sepia, a favorite writing and illustrating medium of Japanese artists for centuries.

The main value of the cuttlefish today is for the production of cuttlebone, used in bird cages for canaries to sharpen their beaks. The "bone" is enclosed by the skin of the animal's back and actually is the vestige of the mollusk shell worn by its long extinct ancestors.

Hagen said it is expected that aquariums throughout the United States and the world will contribute specimens of aquatic life to the $10 million research and education facility to be built here.

"There are good indications that Japan will provide some of the colorful fish that abound in the Japanese Archipelago," Hagen said. "One of these is the red tai, an important food fish and a relative of the porgy. This species is striking because of its bright red color."

The Acting Director said one of the important contributors will be the Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco. Earl S. Herald, curator for Steinhart, said

the aquarium will donate Pacific moray eels, swell sharks and leopard sharks, and the giant Pacific octopus, the world's largest species. This octopus reaches a spread of up to 15 feet and a weight of 120 pounds.

Other aquariums in the United States are expected to contribute such specimens as piranha, rays, sharks and dolphins.

Hagen said a survey has shown that the dolphin--popularly known as a porpoise--is the favorite of aquarium visitors because of its high intelligence.

In second place are the sea horse and the more ominous creatures such as the octopus, shark, piranha, electric eels, moray eels and the sting ray.

"These animals have a special fascination," Hagen said. "People are especially curious about things they believe are dangerous, but the reputation of some of the creatures is not fully deserved."

The octopus, for example, has an ancient reputation for being the terror of the deep. In reality he is a comparably mild animal. The reputation persists, Hagen said, because the octopus appears ferocious.

The octopus could be extremely dangerous. He has all the equipment, including a poisonous bite that paralyzes fish. In his natural habitat, however, the octopus is skittish as far as man is concerned.

In captivity, he loses his fear of man and at times becomes almost tame. Hagen said that coming into contact with the octopus is more likely to be injurious to the marine animal than a man.

"It isn't difficult to pull away from his suction cups," the Acting Director said. "If you do it too quickly, you might tear off the horny cap the octopus has over each suction."

The piranha is not spectacular in size or design, but the paradox of its reputation and innocuous appearance give this South American fish a special attraction.

Hagen said the piranha is especially dangerous near Indian villages where garbage is thrown in the rivers. The piranha learns to associate a splash with food. In more remote areas, however, the piranha is not likely to attack a swimmer unless he smells blood.

The Fisheries Center plans to have 1,300 kinds of aquatic life--one of the largest collections in the world. It is expected that many will be donated. The remainder will be purchased.

The specimen most sought after by all aquariums, and one which the Fisheries Center hopes to obtain, is the coelacanth, or "living fossil" fish.

Fossils of the coelacanth are found in strata of the Middle Devonian Era, which began about 325 million years ago. It occurred first as a fresh water fish but later showed up as a marine fish in the Triassic Era, beginning about 190 million years ago. Then none were found, and it was believed the coelacanth had been extinct for at least 100 million years.

The first scientific awareness that the coelacanth was still living occurred in 1938 when one was caught in a trawl off the southeastern coast of Africa. The fish measured about five feet in length and was taken from a depth of about 250 feet.

Hagen said a few coelacanth were caught in the 1950's in the same area but none remained alive for more than several hours.

He said the coelacanth is a true fish, but in the evolutionary tree it is close to where amphibians such as the salamander branched off.

He noted that the paired pectoral fins of fish, which become shoulders and arms in evolution, and the pelvic fins, which become hind legs, are in the advance stages of becoming limb-like in the coelacanth.

"Finding this fish alive," Hagen said, "is like finding a living dinosaur."

There are some species of aquatic life that it will not be practical to keep at the National Fisheries Center. These include the barracuda, which despite its viciousness is too delicate and nervous to withstand captivity. In confinement, it continually smashes into the sides of its tank and dies of the injuries.

The manta ray, which reaches a spread of 22 feet, requires too much area for swimming. Also, it depends on plankton for food, and aquariums cannot supply the microscopic animals and plants in sufficient amounts.

Other species ruled out are those from the deepest parts of the ocean. These fish live in an area of great pressure. When they are brought to the surface, they suffer from decompression and usually die. The release of pressure causes small air bubbles to form and block blood vessels.

The Fisheries Center plans to display models of these fish in a simulated habitat called "Creatures of the Abyssal Depths."

The Center will be constructed on a 20-acre site at Hains Point and is expected to attract 3 million visitors a year. Completion is expected about 1967.

Congress authorized construction of the Fisheries Center with the proviso that construction and operating costs be repaid to the Federal Treasury. This will be accomplished, without cost to the taxpayers of the Nation, by charging admission to all except student groups.

x x x