N.O. aquarium called finest in the country

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NEW ORLEANS — The black-footed penguin brays like a donkey, the giant flathead catfish has been known to prey on ducks and unfortunate dogs — and both of these unique creatures were turning heads on Labor Day at the Aquarium of the Americas.

The $48 million aquarium, which officially opened its doors Saturday, drew tens of thousands of spectators Monday as the one-million-gallon aquatic wonderland was dedicated at a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Gov. Buddy Roemer and New Orleans Mayor Sidney Barthelemy joined aquarium executive director Don Forman in praising the aquarium as an economic and cultural catalyst for both the city and state.

"Isn't it ironic that the wetlands state will have the finest aquarium in America," Roemer said.

Barthelemy reminded the audience that, before construction on the aquarium began in the fall of 1987, the present site of the aquarium and adjacent Woldenberg Riverfront Park was lined with dilapidated warehouses.

"See what a difference a few years can make. Today, those warehouses are gone — replaced by a multimillion-dollar aquarium and 37 acres of green space," the mayor said.

"Our is truly the finest riverfront in the world," he added.

Forman, who said roughly 60,000 people toured the aquarium Sunday compared to 13,000-plus on Saturday, boasted that the aquarium will revitalize the Crescent City's relationship with the Mighty Mississippi.

"We're proud and excited to say that today the river is coming back to the city," he said.

The Aquarium of the Americas features four major exhibits — the 132,000-gallon Caribbean Reef exhibit, the Amazon Rain Forest, the Mississippi River, and the half-million-gallon Gulf of Mexico exhibit — in addition to other individual showcases of tropical life.

Above, visitors to the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans gape at an alligator garfish in the Gulf of Mexico exhibit. At top left, people move through the Amazon Rain Forest exhibit, which includes piranhas as well as other fish, birds and plants indigenous to the South America region.

Advocate staff photo by Bill Feig
The black-footed penguin, which typically is found off the coast of South Africa but also in the aquarium's Living in Water area, is capable of swimming 30 mph underwater. Sixteen of the flightless marine birds call the aquarium home.

The giant flathead catfish — whose diet consists of geese, ducks and an occasional dog — can grow to a weight of 100 pounds in the Mississippi River. “They eat dogs?” asked one amazed visitor.

If each of the major exhibits has a star attraction, then the ferocious piranha is the Amazon Rain Forest’s main draw. About 30 red-bellied piranhas reside in a 3,000-gallon tank licensed by the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

DWF would only allow male piranhas for the exhibit in order to control reproduction in the unlikely event they escaped due to a catastrophe, aquarium-goers were told as they entered the exhibit.

The Gulf of Mexico exhibit, in which the legs of an offshore oil drilling platform were recreated by aquarium construction workers, appeared to lure the largest and longest-staying crowds on Monday.

The Gulf exhibit houses 8-foot-long sharks, 11-foot-long alligator gar, 175-pound tarpon, grouper, stingrays, a 12-foot sawfish — all of which can be viewed through seamless acrylic windows measuring 14 feet high, 50 feet long and 12 inches thick.

“The shark tank was my favorite,” said Mike Roach of New Bern, N.C., who was impressed with the entire aquarium but didn’t like the crowds.

The Caribbean Reef, the highlight of which is a 30-foot-long acrylic viewing tube, sports queen and French angelfish, blue tangs, whitespotted filefish, rainbow runners, nurse sharks and stingray.

Ray Houck of Metairie braved scorching heat and large crowds to visit the aquarium Monday with his wife and two daughters.

“I think it was great. Very impressive,” he said. “It’s something New Orleans needs for the kids.”

Ronald Burke of New Orleans said the aquarium was well worth the $25 million generated from bonds backed by a 3.8-mill property tax approved by Orleans Parish voters in 1986. Private donors contributed the remaining $15 million to build the aquarium.

“It was fantastic,” he said. “Well worth the taxpayer’s money. It was put to good use.”