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Encyclopedia of Life

**Encyclopedia of Life and Photosynth bring a new experience to users
Innovative technology provides a fresh way to experience Encyclopedia of Life species pages**

Washington, DC- Aug. 20, 2008-Encyclopedia of Life (EOL) announced today it is using Microsoft Photosynth to allow EOL to get an up-close look at selected natural-history specimens housed in research facilities, museums, and other scientific collections. The specimens showcased in the Photosynth launch—the first of what are expected to be thousands to be displayed this way— will give scientists, students, and nature enthusiasts the opportunity to study intricate details of specimens from eight different species, including a harlequin beetle, a brain coral and a toucan skeleton. The specimens were photographed at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) at Harvard University, one of EOL’s six cornerstone institutions.

This unique opportunity to collaborate with Photosynth will provide EOL users with a completely new way to experience images on the Internet. Photosynth analyzes several digital photos of the same object and then creates a three-dimensional, 360-degree representation of the object. Collections of images that have been processed this way are called “synths.” Viewers can digitally manipulate the synth in the same way that they would the original object.

EOL users will benefit because they will be able to view a specimen from any angle, zoom in or out, and rotate the image to show exactly what they want to see. A synth can showcase virtually every detail of the beauty and complexity of the specimen. Scientists without access to collections will be able to study specimens from around the globe and also upload their own images to share. Artists will be able to compose illustrations using the precise specifications of the species with no guesswork required. And eventually, students and citizen scientists will be able to create their own synths.

“The mission of EOL—to advance and preserve knowledge about the world’s species—demands that we take advantage of new tools whenever possible. Our collaboration with Photosynth provides the perfect opportunity to use cutting-edge technology to incorporate a new visual element to the way we engage with our users,” said James Edwards, Executive Director of EOL.

The Encyclopedia of Life is an extraordinary global initiative that aims to document Earth’s 1.8 million known species (as well as all newly described species) and make that information freely available on the Internet. It is sponsored by some of the world’s leading scientific institutions, including the Marine Biological Laboratory, Missouri Botanical Garden, Field Museum of Natural History, Biodiversity Heritage Library, Smithsonian Institution and the

MCZ. EOL is assembling, in one digital environment, scientifically authenticated information on all known species of animals, plants, and microorganisms. The data provided through EOL is high-quality, well-organized, up-to-date and will be presented on an unprecedented scale. The project is driven by urgency—an urgency to document all known species, some of which are disappearing at an alarming rate. Since the release of the first 40,000 species pages in February 2008, the EOL website has received millions of visitors worldwide. Users will soon be able to use innovative tools to upload their own species observations and photos to the EOL portal.

“While selected specimens from the MCZ’s collections are the first synths to appear on EOL, this collaboration with Microsoft will give users an entirely new way to participate in EOL,” said Joshua Edwards, Photosynth Product Manager, Microsoft Corp.

Photosynth was created through a collaboration between Microsoft and the University of Washington (UW) and is based on the groundbreaking research of Noah Snavely (UW), Steve Seitz (UW) and Richard Szeliski (Microsoft Research). The program combines dozens, hundreds or thousands of digital photos of a scene or object to present a detailed 3-D model (synth) of the subject, giving viewers the sensation of smoothly gliding around it from every angle. The synth can be constructed regardless of whether the photos are from a single or multiple sources. The result is like a hybrid of a slide show and a gaming experience that lets the viewer zoom in to see greater detail or zoom out for a more expansive view. Viewing the photos in a 3-D context gives viewers a strong sense for the place where the images were captured. Photosynth can be downloaded, for free, at <http://photosynth.com>. Currently, it is available only in English and only for Windows and Windows Vista operating systems.

The Museum of Comparative Zoology is a world-renowned center for research and education in evolutionary biology and biodiversity science. Its collections comprise more than 21 million specimens of living and extinct species, which support the activities of students, researchers and educators from both within and outside Harvard University.

The Encyclopedia of Life is an ambitious project to organize and make freely available via the Internet virtually all information about life present on Earth. This unmatched online resource is compiled from existing scientific databases and from contributions by experts and non-experts throughout the world. EOL aims to build one infinitely expandable page for each of the planet’s known species.

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Note to editors: For more information on Encyclopedia of Life, please visit www.eol.org.
For more information on the Museum of Comparative Zoology, please visit www.mcz.harvard.edu.