

**An Interview with visiting Peruvian paleontologist Manuel Martinez Carceres
by George Phillips, MMNS Paleontology Curator**



Mr. Carceres conducted research at the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science from October 28, 2008 through November 1, 2008. He primarily studied our fossil whale *Cynthiacetus*, which was formally (scientifically) described and named in 2005 by Dr. Mark Uhen of the University of Michigan (now at the University of Alabama). However, he also took measurements of two other fossils whales in the museum collection: *Basilosaurus* and *Zygorhiza*.

George: **Manuel, you are a PhD/Doctoral student from Lima, Peru, studying fossil whales at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, France. Please tell us a little more about your current studies/student career.**

Manuel: I was born in Lima and I went to Paris when I was 18, after finish my two first years at the college. In Paris, I continued my studies at the Faculty of Sciences and I got my Bachelor's degree in Biology in 2003. Then, I started my Master's; conducted by my committee chair Christian de Muizon (palaeontologist at the Museum of Natural History in Paris) and I got my Master's degree in Systematics and Paleontology this year. Now I'm registered at the Doctoral School of the MNHN (Paris Museum) and I'm working on my PhD dissertation.

George: **What specifically about fossil whales are you studying?**

Manuel: I'm studying the emergence of the modern whales. Cetaceans are known for about 50 millions years ago, but the actual modern whales appear only about 30 million years ago. I'll try to puzzle out the most important changes in the morphology and functional morphology that happened in this part of the whales' history. Actually, I'm studying the transition from archaeocetes to modern whales. (Archaeocetes include all cetaceans fossils that are not considered as modern whales). First archaeocetes were found in Pakistan and they were amphibious animals, about the size of a wolf or a dog. Then archeocetes become more aquatic and we know now a lot of species that allow us to reconstruct the natural history of whales.)

George: **Where else have you done research? Where will you go next?**

Manuel: I started my visit to the American collections in South Carolina, where I visited the Charleston Museum, the first museum of the US. In Charleston, I worked with Dr. Albert E. Sanders. Then I was in Statesboro, Georgia, with Dr. Jonathan Geisler at Georgia Southern University. After Jackson, I will be in D.C., visiting the Smithsonian collection. Then, I will return to Paris but I'll come back next year to continue my research at the University of Michigan and maybe the University of Alabama.

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George: **How did you become interested in paleontology? Did you collect fossils as a child?**

Manuel: Like all the kids, I discovered paleontology thanks to dinosaurs. Then, when I was in elementary school, I started to be interested by natural sciences. I started to buy any book speaking about sciences and fossils, but as in Peru there is not a Paleontology program, I left this idea for few years. Then I had the possibility to go in France and register me at the faculty and at the museum of Paris. Peru is a treasure replete of fossils. I collected some invertebrates (ammonites and stars-sea) but I'm not really proud of this. I don't know how many fossils I have broken. You know, when we are children and we don't have really the good techniques...

George: **Thus far, how has your research experience been in the United States? Has it been relatively difficult or easy to conduct business, find lodging, or do research here? Have the people here (U.S. citizens) been helpful or difficult?**

Manuel: Very good. It's one of my best experiences in my work. Scientists are very nice with me. Sanders, Geisler and now you help me and make my research less complicated. I was living with Sanders and Geisler in Charleston and Statesboro respectively. Here, I'm lodging in a hotel, near to the Mississippi Museum of Natural Sciences. So, I had no problem finding lodging.

I had some problems because of my bad chance: my computer broken down, I had a wrong flight from Savannah was not good, and my luggage was lost in Charleston. But in all this cases, there was always someone to help me. American people are very agreeable with me.

The collection of Charleston is maybe the most important collection in Early Oligocene whales (about 30 Mya) of the world and the most important fossil of Georgia's Museum is an very interesting archaeocete. Here, I'm studying particularly a big archaeocete related to modern whales, very important for my research because we have in Paris maybe one specimen of the same species and a part of my PhD dissertation will be the meticulous study of this specimen.

George: **How long have you been speaking English? Do you speak any other languages?**

Manuel: Less than a month here in the U.S., but I have been watching American television for a couple of years, including "Family Guy." I speak Spanish, French, and some Quechuan.