

## TEXAS HIGHWAYS/FOTOFEST SIDEBAR--EARTH FORUM/MALLORY

### **EARTH FORUM: Browsing the global environment**

Last go-round (1994), FotoFest set out to break new ground by creating an exhibit that would merge information technology and concern for the environment. The result: a techno-exhibit called Earth Forum which wowed photo devotees at the biennial event. Today, Earth Forum continues to wow the public as a permanent exhibit at the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

A joint project of the museum and FotoFest, the one-of-a-kind Earth Forum allows visitors, working individually or in small groups, to become "test pilots on the information superhighway." By simply rotating a blue trackball and pressing an orange button, exhibit "info-nauts" explore the world's environment and people at six integrated electronic workstations, each dealing with a continent and a global resource: South America and biodiversity; North America and fresh water; Oceania/ Antarctica and the oceans; Asia and the atmosphere; Europe and energy; and Africa and agriculture.

Workstation wall maps, globes, and photos from space provide hands-on reference points for each continent's "big picture." Videos, text, still photos, music, and narration (all quickly accessed via computer and laser disk) generate as much information, sights, and sounds as curiosity demands.

Information-gathering organizations like NASA, the National Geographic Society, and the World Resources Institute donated gigabytes of electronic information to create the exhibit's collective database. An adjacent central kiosk supplied by Rice University features computers with up-to-the-second images and data taken from the Internet to complement workstation learning.

This all-at-once electronic experience becomes a trivia buff's paradise. Are most of the world's fish caught in shallow water? What geologic force helped form Italy and Sicily? Which direction does the Nile River flow? What does native music from Oceania sound like?

More than trivia, however, Earth Forum raises tough environmental questions and encourages visitors to use data and images at their fingertips to seek answers. Groups of all ages can play the roles of demographers, geographers, statisticians, and political scientists during one-hour problem-solving simulations. Videophones even allow "enviro-sleuths" at different workstations to view or talk to each other to cooperatively study issues and predict the future.

Browsing the global environment at Earth Forum, says Carolyn Sumners, the museum's director of astronomy and physics, demonstrates "how people around the planet can be connected on an information superhighway, with the whole world as close as a computer screen."

Earth Forum hours: Mon-Sat 9-6. Admission: free with regular museum admission of \$3, \$2 seniors and under 12 (museum members free). Thursday afternoons are free to everyone. Workstations are closed to the public if reserved by a group, so call in advance to check availability. During the school year, grades 5-12 can book morning Earth Forum simulations Monday through Friday. Cost: \$90 per class of up to 30 students plus teachers (includes previsit and postvisit curriculum materials, as well as museum admission). Make reservations at least two weeks to a month in advance.

For more details write to the Houston Museum of Natural Science, One Hermann Circle Drive, Houston 77030; call 713/639-4629 or fax 713/639-4635 (Email: [sumners@hmns.mus.tx.us](mailto:sumners@hmns.mus.tx.us)).