Field trip to the Virginia Museum of Natural History

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Historical geology is an introductory course with no college level prerequisites. As such, to begin the course students learn a little about minerals, the rock types and how to interpret their structures, and plate tectonics. They also get an overview of evolution and how relative and radiometric dating work. A “walk through time” for the remainder of the semester follows this broad introduction to geology, as students learn about how the land and organisms have evolved through time.

This field trip is a culmination of the lab exercises they have done at the college. Through the exhibits at the Virginia Museum of Natural History, which happens to be only 15 minutes from campus, the students can put all of the pieces of what they’ve learned to date together. It also provides a great starting point to introduce deep time. One of the three permanent exhibits is entitled Uncovering Virginia. By design it show what five regions in the commonwealth look like today, along with fossils known from each locality, and they provide a reconstruction of what it would have looked like at the time the fossil organisms were alive.

We start by constructing our timeline, proceed to go through the exhibits, and return to the timeline to see how it all fits. I select the student groups, to limit idle chatting as they walk around, and follow as best I can as they go throughout the exhibits. I also designate a starting point for each group to prevent clustering. We have specific time frames in which they return to our timeline to regroup and keep students focused, and to allow for any questions I was not able to answer when they were in the exhibits. This can also serve to ensure the is no pile up of my students blocking exhibits from other visitor’s or too many students at one place for them all to see well.