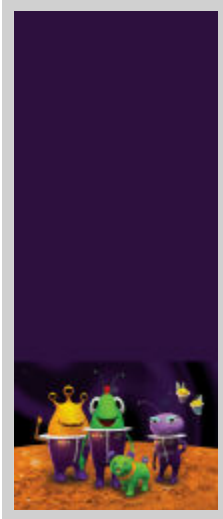


Zula Patrol Lands at the EcoTarium

BY lisa littlewood



Zachary and Jacob, 5-year old twins from Sterling, wait anxiously for the show to begin. Both are wearing baseball caps and huge grins as they look up, awed that they would be seeing, in just a few short minutes, Professor Multo, one of their favorite cartoon characters on the huge domed screen that reaches far above and behind them.

"Do you watch *Zula Patrol* at home?" planetarium director Melissa Dowd asks the boys.

"We watch it every day!" one responds with a huge smile while the other nods enthusiastically.

Their mother tells me they have been waiting a year for the *Zula Patrol* to come to Worcester. "We saw it in Chicago and couldn't wait for it to come here," she said.

As the show begins I can tell the boys apart only by the color of their shirts in the dark theatre; Zachary is in navy blue, Jacob in yellow. While their reactions differ slightly during the show, Zachary is jumping up and down and cheering on the likeable Zula crew while his brother has his hands over his ears because he thinks it is a little loud, they reunite with a common reaction in the end. "It was great!" They both tell me.

The 23-minute digital planetarium show, *The Zula Patrol: Under the Weather*, is running in conjunction with the new exhibit, *Mission Weather*, at the Ecotarium in Worcester. Both are based on the popular television show geared at children age 3-8. The planetarium show and exhibit opened on June 7, with the exhibit running through November and the planetarium show running indefinitely.

Prior to attending the exhibit, I had little knowledge of who or what Zula was, but my lack of knowledge certainly did not affect my enjoyment of the exhibit or the show. *The Zula Patrol* is a likeable trio of aliens who travel through the universe exploring the planets and teaching their viewers lessons in science and astronomy along the way.



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In typical Zula fashion *Under the Weather* begins with the characters expressing their curiosity and posing the question, "What is weather anyway?"

Not knowing if I could come up with an accurate answer if my own daughter asked me that same question, my ears perked up and I listened more carefully. "Weather is whatever is happening in the sky outside and no matter what, there are six elements that make up weather: temperature, air pressure, wind, humidity, clouds and precipitation," the characters explain.

As several parents tell me during the exhibit, they and their children love watching *The Zula Patrol* at home because of its accuracy and educational focus on teaching children science and astronomy. Many of the parents and children in attendance are veterans and it does not take me long to learn that *The Zula Patrol* has some enthusiastic and devoted followers.

Rob and Betsy Surrat of Arlington tell me that their 6-year old son Casey is a huge Zula fan. "He was willing to put up with the car ride because he was so excited about the exhibit!" Betsy said.

Casey, who was Venus in his school's recent planet play, has really enjoyed the crossover between the television show's content and the things he was learning in school.

Liz Black of Mendon, who is attending the exhibit with her 5-year old daughter Olivia, loves the show for similar reasons. "We set our schedule by when *Zula Patrol* is on," she said. "I think the show is wonderful. It's enjoyable but also very science based. Even if the kids aren't understanding the full concepts they get partial concepts."

After the planetarium show, I approach the exhibit and am at first slightly overwhelmed by the size and bright colors of the six stations. Once I jump in, like the rest of the kids who don't seem the least bit fazed, I realize it doesn't really matter where you begin; each station is independent and has lessons of its own.

The six interactive stations allow participants to explore many of the elements and characteristics of weather.

As one parent says, "It is nice to see exhibits that say 'please touch'. The kids really enjoy that."

The learning stations are as follows:

Mission Weather helps children to hear the sounds of different types of weather. Turning cylinders filled with beads and other objects simulate sounds such as rain, thunder and wind.

The wind station seems to be a favorite among the kids, at least while I'm standing by. Stomping on a pedal near the ground pushes wind up through a tube which can be directed at objects such as a tree and a windmill, which you will in fact see moving if you stomp hard enough.

As mist blows out the middle, children will enjoy learning about the different types of clouds and their characteristics at the cloud station.

The hot and cold tunnels are as visually enticing to the children as they are educational. Huge domes, one red, one blue are hot and cold inside, with a small tunnel connecting the two.

For children who want to get their revenge on Zula villain Dark Truder the Weather Window is an interactive animated exhibit that allows participants to choose between a variety of weather options. Once you make your choices (heavy rain, very hot, and heavy wind for example) and push start you get to watch as Dark Truder experiences the impact of your choices.

Lastly, the Multopedia allows kids to choose a type of weather and watch it progress. For example, I watched a branch freeze and then thaw and depending on how fast or slow you turn the wheel you can see this in slow motion or fast.

The only thing missing for me on this day is my own daughter who just turned one, making me relatively new to the world of animated friends and talking aliens. It feels a bit odd to be here without a child - someone to unabashedly stomp wind billows and run through tunnels. She is a bit young for the exhibit (geared at children ages 3-8) and given that it was her naptime she would have been a bit cranky. At times I feel a bit like Dorothy in Oz or Alice in Wonderland, perplexed and awed by these new worlds; wondering how I got

there and how I am supposed to interact with these strange encounters. But on days like today I am enjoying the adventure and learning a lot along the way and by the look on many of the parents faces I am assured that they too, though sometimes perplexed, are also secretly enjoying the excuse to learn about the world through their own children's eyes.

Lisa Littlewood is a freelance writer who lives in Whitinsville with her husband Scott and 1-year old daughter Ava.

About the Exhibit

What you need to know to partake in your own out of this world weather adventure:

The EcoTarium is located at 222 Harrington Way in Worcester (just a short drive off of 290) Hours are Tuesday- Saturday, 10-5 & Sunday 12-5.

Admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for children ages 3-18, with children under 3 being free. Admission includes all stationary exhibits. Planetarium shows are \$5 extra per person. Also note, if you choose to take the 12-minute train ride around the outdoor premises of the EcoTarium (a fun thing to do with kids) tickets are an extra \$2.50.

While planetarium shows run throughout the day, *The Zula Patrol*, *Under the Weather*, runs at specified times. If your kids are big Zula fans, or you think you may want to do the show in conjunction with the exhibit, try to plan your visit around the planetarium show times which are as follows: Wednesdays and Thursdays, 2:15, Saturdays, 2 p.m., and Sundays 1 p.m.

For more information you can visit the EcoTarium online at www.ecotarium.org.

About Zula Patrol

To watch The Zula Patrol in your area show times are as follows:

- Springfield, WGBYK, Monday-Friday - 8 a.m. & 6 p.m.
- New Bedford, WQED, WEDN, Saturday, 9:30 and WEDNDT1, Saturday, noon.
- Boston, WGBH/WGBX Kids, Monday- Friday 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., Saturday, noon.

If you want to learn more about *The Zula Patrol* you can visit them online at www.zula.com. This show is recommended for kids in preschool thru second grade.