

It's All Happening At the Hall Of Mammals

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It may have been the only Washington party where the animals were better groomed than the people.

"The brown bear—you notice how wonderful the fur looked?" asked Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence Small. He leaned closer and whispered: "The taxidermist told me the secret. Pert shampoo."

Hairdressers, take note.

All the animals looked sleek and shiny at last night's opening of the Kenneth E. Behring Family Hall of Mammals at the National Museum of Natural History.

The hall, which opens to the public on Saturday, is a state-of-the-art exhibition with hundreds of buffed and restuffed creatures large and small. The old animals got a face-lift, as did the museum's West Wing, and the mood last night was as giddy as a divorcee after a spa makeover.

"This is a fabulous exhibit that sets a new standard for science museums," said a clearly pleased Small.

More than 500 guests were invited to the black-tie party hosted by Small and Natural History Museum Director Cristian Samper. The entire Behring family was on hand: the multimillionaire, his wife, Pat, their five sons and a pack of grandchildren.

Behring, 75, is the Smithsonian's \$100 million man who brought the museum into big leagues of high-profile donors. In 1997, the California real estate developer announced a \$20 million gift to the museum, the largest for a renovation in its history. (In 2000, Behring pledged \$80 million more to the National Museum of American History.)

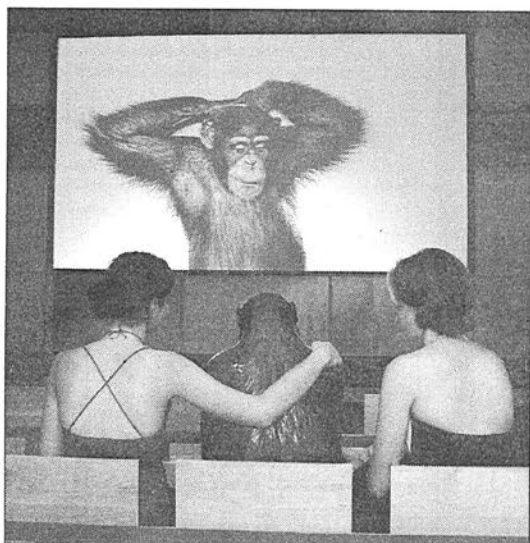
With an additional \$10 million in federal funds, the museum first renovated the Rotunda, then tackled the old west side of the building for a permanent mammal exhibition named for guess who?

"It's through my love of nature and wildlife that I first became aware of the need for a new hall of mammals at the Smithsonian," Behring told the crowd last night.

The 25,000-square-foot hall boasts 274 mounted animals from four continents. Twenty-five are from Behring's private collection (including a kudu, buffalo, wild boar, giraffe, leopard and lion) donated to the museum before his monetary gift. Behring is an avid big-game hunter and has been criticized by animal welfare groups for hunting endangered animals. In 1999, the Smithsonian found itself in a huge flap when he offered four rare Asian sheep he had shot in Kazakhstan two years earlier—an offer the institution ultimately



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A big cat and his catch, above, are one of the refurbished displays in the Kenneth E. Behring Family Hall of Mammals. At left, Lauren and Megan Sullivan keep a bronze statue of an ape company.



Benefactor Kenneth Behring, left, with Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence Small at last night's party.

declined.

"Everything I've ever taken has never hurt the wildlife," Behring said as he walked through the exhibition. "Poaching is what kills all the animals. Hunters never take females or babies—or a male unless there's another to replace him."

The vast majority of animals in the exhibit are part of the museum's collection and died of natural causes, said director Samper. "Our policy is that we do not kill animals for the purpose of putting on display."

The African elephant in the Rotunda, nicknamed Henry, was the first to get spruced up. (Careful observers will note that although Henry appears in fine shape, the bull elephant long ago was, er, altered so as not to shock small children and delicate females.) The other animals—from tiny mice to a hippopotamus—received head-to-paw refurbishings, including new fur to replace moth-eaten bits and new poses.

"I just think it's stunning," said Philip Kopper,

who wrote a history of the museum two decades ago. "It's taking animals and making them look real, but in a way we can look at them."

Which is the general idea: Look, but don't touch. It's possible to get very close to each animal, but they are protected with glass to keep sticky fingers at bay. (The interactive exhibition was created for families with school-age children.) The hall is divided into several geographic locations around the globe and displays the animals in habitats, tracing the evolution of mammal families and their survival adaptations.

"I like everything," said 9-year-old Jonathan Frelich, who gave the exhibit a "10."

Samper said he hopes the new hall will inspire other donations. "We have big plans for the museum," he said. "We want to redo the other halls." First up: a new exhibition devoted to the sea and ocean life.

"One hall down, two to go," Small happily promised the crowd.



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