



Smithsonian brings back wild things

Hall of mammals, with 274 specimens, focuses on evolution

Associated Press

WASHINGTON--The skylight glows high above the massive exhibition hall, returned finally to the look its designer had in mind nearly a century ago. The Smithsonian is preparing to welcome visitors to the mammal family reunion.

Furry creatures large and small already pose in lifelike displays across the room as workers scurry past, readying lighting here and display stands there.

When the doors open to the public Nov. 15 there will be 274 specimens on display in the new hall of mammals at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

It's a trip through the history of creatures that survived the age of dinosaurs and began to diversify 65 million years ago, spreading to nearly every corner of the globe, said Kay Behrensmeyer, co-curator of the new exhibit.

Museum Director Christian Samper, leading a tour of the project Thursday, said it's the largest renovation the museum has undertaken and will employ the latest in technology to offer visitors a learning experience.

The new Kenneth E. Behring Family Hall of Mammals, named for a major donor, occupies one of three original wings of the museum, which opened in 1910.

Originally designed as a large open area, the space was divided up into small rooms and offices during the war years and never returned to its original state, said Robert Sullivan, the museum's associate director for public programs.

Now it's being restored to that original look, open space with towering walls and natural light, and filled with mammals -- animals that nurse their young -- ranging from manatees and dolphins to a clouded leopard, tiny shrews, an exotic platypus.

"Fundamentally, this exhibit is about evolution," said Behrensmeyer, displaying a tiny neck vertebra from an ancient giraffe and its massive counterpart from the modern animal.

"Giraffes didn't just whistle and get a long neck," she said. Rather, that feature evolved as a feeding adaptation.

It's that sort of adaptation the museum hopes to explain in the exhibit, the

great diversity that has developed in mammals as they adapt to their environment, said co-curator Robert Hoffmann.

The displays will show animals in ways that tell specific stories about how they have changed and adapted over time to make the most of their environment, whether arctic or desert or prairie or woodland.

An eight-minute videotape traces the history of mammals, and visitors will be able to touch the fossils of extinct animals and stand in a cast of ancient hominid footprints from Africa.

There are four discovery zones with interactive displays including lights, audio, video, computer displays, flip doors, push buttons and moveable objects.

In the Frozen North zone, for example, visitors will be able to touch a refrigerated model of a ground squirrel kept at typical hibernating temperature, while in the South America area they can use flashlights to expose the reflected "eye shine" of nocturnal mammals.

Sullivan stressed that no animals were killed to be put in this display.

Rather they were obtained from existing collections or from zoos when animals died of natural causes.

Click here to return to story:

http://charleston.net/stories/053003/wor_30mammal.shtml



Over 25 years, we have evolved our viewpoint about design to create extraordinary moments and opportunities for people to have experiences that change their understanding and perspective of the world they live in.

REICH+PETCH

1867 Yonge Street Toronto, ON Canada M4S 1Y5
TEL (416) 480 2020 FAX (416) 480 1881
www.reich-petch.com
info@reich-petch.com