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New exhibits at National Museum of Natural History

By **LAURA WITHERS**

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Equipped with new skylights, fresh paint and 274 mammal species, the National Museum of Natural History will open its new mammal hall to the public Saturday.

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The six-year renovation project will end when the Smithsonian Institution museum welcomes children and adults into the Kenneth E. Behring Hall of Mammals, which features hundreds of mammals from four continents and nearly a dozen fossils.

The exhibit focuses on how mammals - including humans - share characteristics and adapt to their surroundings, said curator Kay Behrensmeyer at a news conference Thursday. All mammals share three traits: hair, milk and specialized ear bones.

"This hall is about us," said Robert Sullivan, the museum's associate director. "Everybody who walks into this hall is a mammal. It says you are who you are because of your family and the place you grew up."

Visitors first encounter Africa, then South America, North America and Australia. Animals, preserved through taxidermy, are presented in natural poses with placards and dioramas explaining how they evolved and adapted to different environments.

The mammals - 242 new ones and 32 from the old exhibits - are displayed on multiple tiers in glass cases.

A leaping tiger with white teeth in full view greets visitors as they enter the hall and look up. In a glass case nearby, a pika, a 4-inch-long arctic hare that resembles a chipmunk, looks as if it's yelling at a moose facing it.

In the Australia exhibit, five sugar gliders carefully placed in a line demonstrate how the tiny gliding opossums push off with their hind legs and soar between trees up to 55 yards apart.

The 18-foot-tall South African giraffe that stands with its neck and blue rubber tongue extended as if it were eating leaves in a tree is perhaps the most cherished animal in the collection. It was also the most difficult to assemble.

Because the animal was too tall to fit through the exhibit's doorways, it had to be separated into two parts at the neck and transported from the taxidermy studio in nearby Virginia. The giraffe was the only specimen in the hall that taxidermists had to assemble on-site. A second giraffe spreads its legs as if to drink from a stream.

In addition to the visual elements in the hall, visitors hear audio clips mimicking the sounds one would hear in the animals' natural habitat. Visitors walk on television screens embedded in the floor showing water and leaves while they hear audio of a thunderstorm to show how animals adapt annually from the dry season to the wet season.

Interactive exhibits such as employee-manned touch carts give visitors a hands-on experience. Flipping doors, pushing buttons and walking over glass displays in the floor, one holding fossilized footprints, increase the

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exhibit's "ooh factor," Sullivan said.

"This is the first time that any of these three main halls have opened to the public the way the architect intended when he designed it," said Elizabeth Musteen, the project manager. "The building is an artifact itself, so it was important to us to treat it as carefully as we treated the specimens in it."

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