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Our Kind Of Fossils

At the Smithsonian, Mammals Rule in More Ways Than One

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Got milk, hair and a "special carbone" and you're the toast of the Smithsonian. The National Museum of Natural History has renovated its Hall of Mammals, and the whole building is now rather mammalcentric, a funhouse of fur. Walk through the place and you feel proud to be mammalian, to be a creature with, among other things, nipples.

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Age mammals, and more mammal bones upstairs, and lots of exhibits on various human cultures, and at the very center of the whole place, in the rotunda, right where you'd think there'd be an apatosaurus, there's an African elephant. The new mammal hall has drawn huge crowds, and is not only dazzling, full of simulated lightning and thunder and rainfall, with animals leaping out of nowhere, but also is a fabulous promotional tool for the stuffed animals on sale in the adjacent Mammal Museum Store.

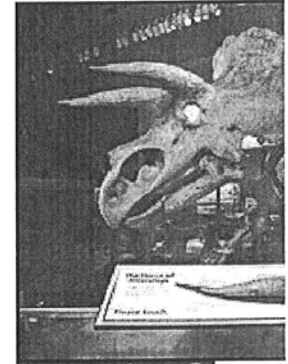
The overall message couldn't be clearer: This is a museum of the mammals, by the mammals, for the mammals.

The dinosaurs still get tremendous display, though not as much, square foot per square foot, as the mammals (which they squashed for 150 million years in direct competition). And let's be brutally honest: Seen one towering reptile with razor-sharp, banana-sized teeth and a tail that can whip around so fast it breaks

But what if you're coldblooded? Lizard-hearted? Scaly? Slimy? What if you use the reptilian part of your brain because that's all you have? Then you're shunned, a nobody, a zoological zero.

Imagine how the insects feel. Exactly: like worms.

In addition to the 274 mammals in the new hall, there are fossil mammals on the other side of the museum, plus some Ice



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If lizards ran the Natural History you'd be sure that triceratops or fossils would get more attention hairy little mammals. (2001 Photo Hurlbert)

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the sound barrier, you've seen 'em all. Every educated person in the world with even the slightest interest in vertebrate paleontology has already taken a plastic T. rex and a plastic triceratops and, using sound effects, forced them to have a squealing death struggle, at the end of which the larger T. rex, seemingly on the verge of victory, takes a horn in its soft underbelly and crumples into the dust. What else is there to know? It's possible that dinosaurs are becoming, to use a pejorative term, the "dinosaurs" of the Natural History Museum.

The so-called Dinosaur Hall is actually crammed with all manner of ancient life, from trilobites to marine reptiles, and there's even a cafe back there, the Fossil Cafe, which couldn't possibly have been located in the mammal hall due to the danger that the food would have hairs in it. The key point is, the Dinosaur Hall essentially encompasses all forms of life over the course of billions of years, but is roughly the same size as the Hall of Mammals, which just covers one animal class of relatively recent vintage. Could we honestly say that this allocation of space would have been the same if the individual in charge of the museum had been, for example -- and we're just trying to think of the most likely neutral party -- an amphibian?

Invertebrates do nothing to protest their shoddy treatment, because, if we may speak bluntly, they're spineless. And microbes get minuscule attention in the museum. Where is the Hall of Prokaryotic Life? Shouldn't we spend a bit more time thinking about all those life forms that have survived for billions of years, even if they haven't, in some cases, managed to develop a nucleus, much less multicellularity? Have we been fair to the blue-green algae?

Who speaks for scum?

There's a reptile exhibit upstairs, but it's a small-scale operation. No one has stepped forward to fund a hall to honor reptiles the way Kenneth Behring funded the mammal hall. Maybe it's a name association thing. Someone like Donald Trump doesn't want to be associated with the word "reptile" any more than he already is.

Museum spokesman Randall Kremer said the Natural History Museum would be thrilled to have someone come forward with money for other types of organisms: "We will take them to the Hall of Mammals and show them that we can do the same for every living creature."

There is genuine concern among museum officials about the "vertebrate skew" of the building, in the words of Robert Sullivan, associate director for public programs.

"Organisms smaller than the naked eye can see, and insects, comprise most of the life on Earth. Insects really own the Earth. We just think we do," Sullivan said. "Between the anthropology and the mammals, we have way too much vertebrates for the exhibition space. When we did the long-range plan, that was a real heated topic of debate."

To its credit, the museum directly addresses the prejudice against non-



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