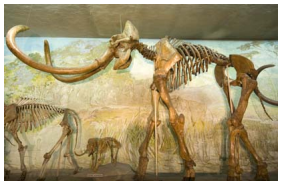

Most collections hidden from public eye

Did you know that 80% of the world's population is insects?

And that the bones of "Archie," the museum's giant mammoth skeleton, were discovered near Wellfleet in 1922?

These were just a few facts shared by associate director Mark Harris of the Nebraska State Museum when he visited the noon Gothenburg Rotary Club.

Harris, who's gathering research for a book about rodeos, was in the area and was guest speaker for the club on June 25 at the Randazzle Cafe.

Harris noted that Archie is the largest mounted mammoth in the world and that the museum's fossil elephant exhibit is the best in the world.

"We celebrated our 140th anniversary last year and the museum is growing and evolving," he said, noting that many scientists regard the museum as among the top 10 university museums of natural history in the United States. "It's also internationally recognized as a research resource."

Interestingly, Harris said that 99% of the collections at the University of Nebraska State Museum are away from the public eye and consist of about 14 million items.

“We have drawers of artifacts from all over the world,” Harris said.

The museum’s parasitology collection is the second largest in the western hemisphere, he said, noting that University of Nebraska-Lincoln students and faculty travel the world on research expeditions.

In fact, a group is now in Mongolia studying parasites.

“Millions of people die from parasites and they affect all living creatures,” Harris said.

Showing a picture of a large dust mite, he described the parasite as living on and around humans and other living creatures but noted it wasn’t harmful.

From the collection, Harris said they share data with other institutions around the world.

Another museum collection Harris highlighted is botany which contains more than 300,000 specimens.

“We’re the leading resource for study of Nebraska’s plant life and plants are so quietly crucial in today’s world.”

Nearly 70,000 specimens are contained in the zoology collection that Harris said is a major resource in the northern Great Plains.

If something goes wrong in the ecosystem, he said scientists can study zoological specimens for answers.

He added that it's also the job of natural science museums to collect specimens before they disappear from the planet.

Researchers in the vertebrae paleontology department study the behavior, reproduction and appearance of extinct animals with vertebrae or a notochord, through the examination of their fossilized remains, Harris said.

"And we're still uncovering fossils today," Harris said.

The Nebraska Department of Roads partners with the state museum in a highway paleontology program.

For example, a 2000 joint project in the Wildcat Hills in the northwest part of the state uncovered one of the richest fossil finds in Nebraska, dating back to 23 million years ago.

Harris said not many dinosaur remains are found in the state because, during that time, the state was a giant inland sea.

More recently, he said scientists played a part in tracing the path of a cougar killed on Interstate 80.

"The chemical isotopes found on its claws revealed the route it had taken," he said.

In addition to Morrill Hall, on the UNL campus, the museum stretches to several parts of the state like Ashfall Fossil Beds and the Hubbard Rhino Barn, both near Royal.

At the Trailside Museum at Fort Robinson, an unusual exhibit of bones found of two bull mammoths fighting can be viewed.

“Their tusks locked and they fell over 12,000 years ago,” Harris said.

To engage youngsters in the field of science, the museum offers many programs such as Dinosaurs and Disasters Day, Sunday with a Scientist and Astronomy Day.

Exhibits such as “Bizarre Beasts” intrigue young and old alike, he said.

Funding for the museum is 21% in earned income, 30% each in federal and state dollars and 19% in private donations.

For more information about the museum, visit www.museum.unl.edu or call (402) 472-2642.

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