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At the Smithsonian, The 'Dirty Dozen' Attacks the Exhibits

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Macho Lions, Fawning Maids Are Now Being Wiped Out By Group Some Call 'PC'

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WASHINGTON — Stephanie Allen stares wistfully up at the 13-foot bull elephant looming over the rotunda of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History.

"It's just like when I came here in fifth grade," the 32-year-old Lancaster, Pa., tourist says. "I love it."

The Smithsonian itself is less enthusiastic. An internal memo describes the elephant as "a trophy piece" and calls for "restoring the elephant's dignity and place."

When told about the proposed changes, Ms. Allen winces. "Oh, Lord," she says. "They're getting wild."

Marching Into the '90s

Some visitors here feel the natural history museum is going "politically correct." But to Robert Sullivan, one of the museum's associate directors, the permanent exhibits are in a "crisis" and "woefully out of date." Many of the installations at the pre-World War I building are among the oldest in the Smithsonian's 15 museums and galleries, and many have been criticized internally for "exoticizing" cultures.

His plan is to upgrade half of the natural history museum's 140,000 square feet of permanent exhibits by 1997, with more dignified presentations of woman, beast and bug. For instance, the museum plans to close an exhibit of Capt. John Smith trading with Powhatan Indians on the James River in 1607. Mr. Sullivan's reason? It's sexist. In it, Capt. Smith stands in a commanding pose on his boat as a bare-breasted Powhatan woman gazes adoringly up at him from a canoe.

Another target is one of the museum's most popular exhibits: a leaping Indian tiger in the mammal hall. A museum memo criticizes the exhibit as one of many "single organism" displays, "passive and limited in purpose to presenting the solitary specimen."

Muscle Man

Mr. Sullivan, 43, mockingly grits his teeth and flexes his muscles, showing how many men pose for snapshots by the tiger. It irks him. "There's a longstanding human tradition to create a myth around animals as a justification for wiping them out," he says. The museum now plans to show the tiger in its natural habitat, leaping at a deer.

Some of the seven million people who visit the museum each year aren't crazy about the prospect of change. Kathy Lindstrom, a tourist from Lena, Wis., crouches below the tiger's jaws and squeals, "Help! Help!" Her friend, Donna Rider, fumbles with a camera.

Ms. Rider scowls at the plan to redefine the tiger. "That's not dignified?" she asks, waving her camera toward the tiger. "It's majestic . . . I'm a biology teacher, and I think it's fine as it is."

Nor does B. Bandyo, a tourist from Chicago, see the need to deep-six Capt. Smith and the Powhatan woman. "It was a picture from 1607. There wasn't the lib movement then. You can't change it in 1992," he says. Anyway, he adds with a shrug, "I don't see anything wrong with it."

Some of the museum's older curators also grumble quietly about how they are being steamrollered by changes one calls "nonsense." Other experts favor change. Jim Sims, a professor of museum studies at George Washington University, says, "These museums are colonial institutions in a post-colonial era. We're not

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changing exhibits to make them politically correct; we're trying to create cultural diversity."

To Mr. Sullivan, the reforms are long overdue. "The folks who were brought up with ideas of fairness in the '60s have a sense of civil rights and gender rights," says the bearded director, wearing khaki pants, button-down shirt and purple paisley tie. "We can influence things now."

Mr. Sullivan bristles when his work is called "PC." "It's deeper. We've got a mandate. Museums are being redefined by principles of pluralism, cultural equity and ecology," he says. He has created a secret group of museum employees called "the dirty dozen," modeled after a 1967 macho movie in which actor Lee Marvin leads a band of convicts behind enemy lines during World War II. The group's mission this year: targeting sexual and cultural inequity in the museum.

What he calls "dilemma labels" are the most conspicuous sign of change so far. Mr. Sullivan's staff posted labels next to several mammal hall exhibits this summer that announce: "The world and our perceptions of it have changed drastically" since 1960, when the mammal displays were installed.

In the African lion exhibit, a lioness lounges with cubs. A male of the species looks in the opposite direction at a zebra herd on the horizon. A label warns: "The images of the female and young lions sitting turned away from the horizon is misleading, considering . . . it is the females who do the hunting."

Even insects and plants are under a revisionist microscope. Otto Orkin, founder of Orkin Pest Control Inc., is donating $500,000 to renovate the insect zoo and replace, among other things, the plexiglass displays housing ants and bees. A tropical rain forest will supplant the boxy dwellings. There will be a tree with a plexiglass cutaway to see beehives. Huge ant farms are in store, too.

"We want to show insects and plants working together, as a key part of the ecosystem," says Mr. Sullivan.

Many museum types applaud the changes, and some people want to go still further. The American Psychological Association was perturbed over one exhibit here last month at the Smithsonian's Experimental Gallery. The traveling display started at the Ontario Science Centre in Canada, where Caryl Marsh, the association project director overseeing the exhibit, immediately noticed a problem. The display was supposed to have five figures in one tableau: a white boy, an elderly white woman, a young black man, a middle-aged woman from India and a young Chinese woman. But the science center had left out the Chinese figure.

"I was appalled and horrified," says Ms. Marsh. "I said, 'I could not travel throughout the U.S., let alone put it in the Smithsonian, without the Asian figure.' " The figure was eventually included.

Indeed, the Smithsonian's current mandate isn't limited to the natural history museum. Next door, the American history museum earlier this year resurrected a popular First Ladies exhibit, which it had closed in 1987. In the old exhibit Eleanor Roosevelt was shown in a peach satin floor-length gown she wore to her husband's 1941 inaugural ball. In the new exhibit, Mrs. Roosevelt is featured in a section on political partners and depicted as a social activist. "We wanted to begin to emphasize the changing role of the 20th-century First Lady," says Edith Mayo, the exhibit's curator.

In the same vein, the new exhibit shows Barbara Bush in the camouflage jacket she wore when she visited troops in the Persian Gulf. Museum officials say, however, that a common visitors' response is: Why did they put Barbara Bush in that ugly outfit? The museum plans to put one of its labels near the camouflage jacket pointing out that Mrs. Bush's ball gown can be seen down the hall.