

CELEBRATE BIG GAME

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E.O. Wilson published an article in the *Wilson Quarterly* in 2002 titled “What is Nature Worth?” Catchy title, right? Nature has many intrinsic as well as monetary values, but the problem is that every person weighs those values differently. Why? Because we all have experienced nature differently. Some believe nature should be left untouched by humans, obviously an impossible feat. Others believe we have the right to utilize nature with the obligation that we conserve and protect it. Hunters fall into the second category.

Hunters hunt. This requires, at the least, an intention to kill an animal. If our hunt is successful, we celebrate that animal and the experience. Non-hunters sometimes question why we like to photograph ourselves with the animals we have taken. They are even more perplexed by hunters who display taxidermy specimens in their homes. In part, hunters do this for the same reason that other people collect and

display photographs, paintings, and sculptures of animals: we are inspired by the beauty of wildlife and the artistry of the taxidermist. More significantly, photos and mounted specimens give tribute to the animals and evoke memories of a treasured experience. Do these specimens have any value other than as mementos and objects of beauty? The answer is yes!

Properly preserved, taxidermy specimens can last for centuries. Early North American trappers, settlers and explorers discovered previously-unknown bird and mammal species. Explorers Lewis and Clark and John James Audubon deposited specimens in museums where some exist today. Whether as prepared mounts or study skins, these taxidermy specimens have multiple values—the first being scientific uses.

The scientific benefits of specimens protected in museums worldwide are invaluable. In these collections reside millions of specimens, extant and extinct, that scientists use to verify new species and work out the phylogenetic classification or reclassification of whole groups of animals. Scientists of the past relied primarily on animal morphology to classify specimens and species. Today, museum specimens are a treasure trove of DNA that molecular biologists, using the latest techniques, can study to identify new species, determine subspecies ranges,

develop evolutionary insights into species origins, and assist in other lines of research. Specimens provide a record of where species occurred in times past, even though they may be gone today. Similarly, specimens collected in new areas, where none occurred before, also reveal much about our changing world.

But what about the educational value of preserved specimens? Every year, thousands of adults and school children tramping through museums and zoos are awed to see magnificent animals on display. Their excitement is contagious! Many will never have the opportunity to see a mountain goat, caribou, or black bear in the wild, but they depart the museum with a new connection to wildlife. Museum and zoo visits give citizens critical insights about the lives and status of animals who share their world, thereby nurturing a conservation ethic in ways that reading a book, watching a documentary, or seeing a YouTube video would never accomplish. Only when humans connect to and appreciate wildlife, do they want to conserve it. Education lays the foundation for a conservation ethic.

The idea for the Boone and Crockett Club’s Records Program originated with early Club members including William T. Hornaday, Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell. The period 1906–1922 saw many big game species in serious decline, so Hornaday established the National Collection of Heads and Horns “to preserve the best specimens of the vanishing big-game animals of the world”. The idea was to establish, for future generations, a

tangible record of magnificent wildlife that would never be seen again. Thank goodness he was wrong about North America’s big game being doomed to extinction! Conservationists of the time, many of them Club members, launched a movement that restored North America’s wildlife to the abundance we enjoy today, including the production of outstanding individuals that qualify for the Club’s Records Program and Big Game Awards.

Adults and children who experience the Big Game Awards have unique opportunity to view, celebrate, and feel a connection with “the best of the best” among large game animals in North America. Being in the presence of magnificent specimens is the next best thing to seeing these animals in the wild. Most of the animals showcased in the Club’s Big Game Awards will return to private collections following the program, so the event is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience some of North America’s most spectacular big game animals.

Such is the mission and the importance of the Boone and Crockett Club’s Records Program and Big Game Awards: to record and celebrate these special animals, to recognize the fair chase hunters who hunted them, and to build a conservation connection with people who value wildlife. The fine specimens accepted to the Records Program and Big Game Awards offer tangible proof that the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is working. This is conservation at its best, deeply rooted in the history and ethics of the Boone and Crockett Club. ■



Taxidermy, especially when on display to the public, gives people an opportunity to see unique North American specimens such as caribou, mountain goats, and musk ox. Logan T. Elliott’s musk ox shown at left was on display and seen by tens of thousands of visitors at the 30th Big Game Awards Exhibit.