

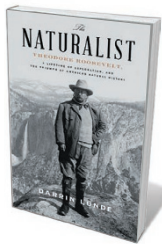
In the museum with Roosevelt

Michael Ross Canfield enjoys a chronicle of the statesman's natural-history legacy.

The head of a Cape buffalo presents itself just inside the door of Theodore Roosevelt's historical home, Sagamore Hill, on Long Island, New York. A few steps further in are mounted rhinoceros horns, then a trophy room framed by elephant tusks. This is, in effect, the personal natural-history museum of the explorer, soldier and 26th US president. Roosevelt also donated hundreds of specimens to the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Between these two kinds of museum — the private and the public — we find the Roosevelt of *The Naturalist* by Darrin Lunde, manager of the Smithsonian's mammal collections.

Lunde's narrative stretches from Roosevelt's youth to his return from a scientific safari in what is now Kenya in 1909–10, a decade before his death. Roosevelt collected and preserved specimens throughout his life. He chronicled his hunts (along with bar fights and chasing outlaws) in popular books such as *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (1885), and continued to collect everything from manta rays in Florida to moose in Canada through his presidency (1901–09) and after. As Lunde reveals, his bursts of field work coincided with — and fed into — the evolving US scientific study of nature that is fostered by museum founders, such as Albert Bickmore of the American Museum of Natural History. Roosevelt's activities filled museums and inspired him to use his political mandate to protect 93 million hectares of public land and establish 5 national parks.

Born in 1858 into a wealthy Manhattan household, the home-schooled Roosevelt avidly read natural histories in the family library and ferreted out animals in the wilder surrounds of New York City. A dead seal that he encountered in a Broadway market when he was around seven made a singular impression; he recorded measurements of it and acquired the head. He established a collection ('The Roosevelt Museum of Natural History') in his bedroom, and a natural-history society with his peers — complete with



The Naturalist: Theodore Roosevelt, A Lifetime of Exploration, and the Triumph of American Natural History
DARRIN LUNDE
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Theodore Roosevelt, 26th US president.

curatorial specialities such as conchologist, and papers on topics such as the migration of whales. In his early teens, he studied taxidermy with John Bell, who had worked with naturalist-illustrator John James Audubon. Later, at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he began to study biology, but eventually gravitated toward economics and history — key preparation for a dual career in statesmanship and conservation.

Roosevelt's field work, like that of most museum naturalists at the time, revolved around specimen collection and preparation, and the window that Lunde opens on this is among the book's novel contributions. Taxidermy involved applying arsenical soap to skins, boiling bones and allowing bacteria or beetles to eat flesh. It was hard and unpleasant, and on Roosevelt's African trip, professionals such as Edmund Heller did much of it for him: Heller "roughed out" specimens by carving soft tissue from the hides and bones. Even as a revered ex-US president in Africa, however, Roosevelt never shied away from close observation of specimens. Taxidermist Carl Akeley photographed him holding a camera while investigating an elephant carcass with a hyena scavenging inside it.

Roosevelt's youthful collecting technique was basic, and included knocking birds' nests from trees; he switched to guns in maturity. Like many hunter-naturalists up to the late twentieth century, he both loved and

killed animals. This contradiction has exercised many. Teasing apart aspects of ethics, morality, manliness and environmentalism in Roosevelt's approach to collecting, Lunde reveals how the president's impulses overlapped. He hunted for meat and sport — a common pursuit among the wealthy on both sides of the Atlantic — as well as science.

That scientific strand was strong. Lunde describes how Roosevelt was able to "hold specimens in his hand", whether bear, cougar or bird, to hone his observational acuity. Roosevelt even chastised hunters who did not learn in this way and report results appropriately, because information could easily be lost to science. Other areas of his life, particularly his approach to politics and policymaking, show the imprint of these habits of observing, collecting disparate elements and information, and analysing assembled parts.

Yet Roosevelt spent relatively little time actually in museums. These were then growing into prominence under pioneers such as Spencer Fullerton Baird, the first curator at the Smithsonian, and C. Hart Merriam, who expanded the scientific study of animals at the US Department of Agriculture, both of whom Lunde discusses. Professional curatorship was not for Roosevelt. Even at Harvard he gravitated toward field work, largely dismissing the focus on section cutting and minutiae taught at Louis Agassiz's museum there. Lunde's remark that exploring museums is "like traveling around the world" reflects Agassiz's view that assemblages of specimens allow a naturalist to read from "the great book of nature". But Roosevelt was not satisfied with simply reading. He wanted to write his own accounts of the wild.

As a curator, Lunde might have shared more about the scope of Roosevelt's collections and their current value, particularly in an age of unprecedented biodiversity loss. However, *The Naturalist* does highlight the crucial importance of maintaining such legacies. It also helps to disentangle Roosevelt's roles as hunter, conservationist and museum man — and for anyone visiting Sagamore Hill, it enriches contemplation of objects such as the bearskin rug or rhino-foot inkwell. ■

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