

The Great Tidepool

TALES OF PACIFIC GROVE, CALIFORNIA
by local award-winning author, [Brad Herzog](#)

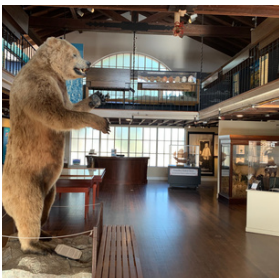


LIVING HISTORY

The Museum of Natural History in Pacific Grove is a historical artifact itself. For 140 years, the museum - one of the first of its kind in America and free to all Monterey County residents - has showcased the rich cultural, biological, and geological wonders of the Central Coast.



Stroll into the hall called Wonder, and it feels as if you've wandered into a forest, complete with trees and the sounds of chirping birds. Meander to the Collection Gallery, and you can explore artifacts from the area's historic Chinese Fishing Village. Amble over to the Bird Gallery and view over 400 specimens. Make your way up to the mezzanine level, and you discover the remarkable effects of climate change on the region's ecosystem.



It is an entertaining education. You learn that the extinct California grizzly reached heights of nine feet and weighed up to 1,700 pounds... that Fort Ord's coastal cliffs erode as much as six feet per year... that birds can see ultraviolet light.



The artifacts are fun and fascinating - from an orca skull to a massive stuffed grizzly, from an Aztec vase to a collection of hand-crafted Hopi Orithu dolls. Yesteryear objects like compasses, tea boxes, war clubs, snowshoes, diving helmets... you could spend a large part of your own personal history exploring the Natural History Museum.



But that's just the tip of the iceberg. There's a bit of a secret beneath the surface - a basement that stores a treasure trove of objects ranging from animals to art to weapons. Basement tours are given to members and volunteers on special occasions and by special request. So I made a special request.

Curators Chris Green and Nate King took me down to a room filled with cabinets and drawers and shelves brimming with innumerable artifacts, some of them still waiting to be examined and processed to determine if they should be part of the museum's permanent collection.



So what did I find there? I'll offer some of my favorites:

A semi-fossilized mammoth tusk, millions of years old and unearthed when Highway 1 was being created toward Carmel. A couple of ancient Alaskan scrimshaws (decorated bone or ivory objects), one bearing a map of the Yukon River, the other crafted into a cribbage board. One of the few eider blankets in existence, made from the skin and scalps of 27 sea-ducks. Various dry aquarium specimens, such as tank crabs from 1915. A 100-year-old ostrich egg. And shelves and shelves of shells from all over the world.



My favorite part of the casual tour took us to cabinets filled with weapons that would make Dungeons & Dragons aficionados gasp. A rhinoceros hide and velvet shield given by the emperor of Ethiopia to Herbert Hoover in 1931. A Malaysian kris (short sword) from the late 19th century. A Sudanese scabbard made out of a whole lizard, head and tail included. Another made from a small crocodile. I could go on and on and on.



As the tour concluded and we walked back up to the main floor, a group of gabby elementary school students on a field trip were exiting the building, making their way toward a school bus that would take them back to Salinas. I had heard them oohing and aahing their way through the museum, but now all was quiet. Silent and serene.



But not really. Because all of the countless artifacts on display and in storage were doing the same thing: telling remarkable stories.



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