Isaac Hebert, 7, a student at the Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired, explores the big teeth of a (stuffed) polar bear with the help of Lloyd Dubuisson, coordinator of a ‘Sensory Safari’ exhibit at the school.

Special animal display helps visually impaired children see with their hands

By ELLYN COUVILLION

In the library at the Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired are picture books and story books and Braille books. And, in a small room off the library, there’s something else that fires the imaginations of the children.

It’s a permanent display of stuffed animals and animal hides that lets the children “see” with their own hands such creatures as a polar bear, a caribou and an African antelope.

The display is the work of the Central Louisiana Chapter of Safari Club International, and the animals housed there are the trophies of hunters from the area and elsewhere in the United States who have donated them to the club for such “Sensory Safari” exhibits.

The exhibit at the School for the Visually Impaired, 1120 Government St., was one of the first permanent exhibits by the Safari Club in the country when it was opened by the local chapter about two years ago.

“I was raised on a small farm and literally hunted and fished every day of my life,” said Lloyd Dubuisson, coordinator for the Sensory Safari exhibit. “Nature and the outdoors, he said, are an extremely important part of his life.

“When I saw how much pleasure it gives the blind children, it just touched me. I’m hooked,” said Dubuisson of his volunteer work with the exhibit.

On a recent day, elementary school-age students and students in their teens at the school paid a visit to the display.

“The rules are that we touch everything,” said Dubuisson, as the children entered the room, accompanied by their teachers and other staff members.

That, of course, is in direct contrast to the instructions at more traditional museum displays, with their “please don’t touch” signs.

Last year the local Safari Club chapter took another Sensory Safari exhibit to Ocean Commotion, a program sponsored by LSU, with dozens of educational displays for children to enjoy.

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"I guarantee you, the polar bear was touched by over 3,000 children," said Alberto J. de Jongh, president of the Central Louisiana Safari Club chapter.

De Jongh was referring to the soft white polar bear hide, with the head and claws intact, that the children like to touch. It was donated to the display by a hunter in Arizona.

Dubuisson has learned that children who are blind tend to be gentler with the animal displays than children who can see.

The blind children are "sensitive, very cautious. They see through their hands," he said, and take time to explore the trophies carefully with their hands.

On one particular day, Charlie Ross, a student at the School for the Visually Impaired, who was turning 8, "stood near the mounted head of a kudu, an African antelope. His wish was "to feel the horns."

A teacher's assistant held him up so he could feel the long, spiral horn protrusions.

Another student, Isaac Hebert, 7, was also lifted up, to feel the horns.

"I'd like to climb on there," said Hebert, who, like Ross, is from Baton Rouge.

Michael Singleton, 15, from Amelia, touched the soft fur of the black bear skin and said, "I wish I had it for a blanket."

Another student, Michael Camppeal, 14, of Bayou Goula, said of the display, "It's fun."

The birds on display, which include a wood duck, raven and sandhill crane, "are soft," said Camppeal.

Coryn Calotta, a teacher for kindergarten and first-grade students at the school, said of the Sensory Safari, "I think it's very helpful. The children thoroughly enjoy it. We use it as an incentive."

She can talk about animals, but unless they actually put their hands on them, they have no idea it's a wonderful way to show the differences of animals," said Calotta.

Dubuisson said that the chapter members try to bring in new things for the collection about every six months.

The majority of the animals are either donated outright or loaned, he said.

Currently the display of trophies includes a Catalina goat, Cape buffalo, caribou, a kudu antelope, white-tailed deer, Rocky Mountain elk and a wilde...