



Visit the Smithsonian museums from the safety of your home

School, such as it was the last few months, is finally out. Thanks to social distancing and face masks, parts of the world are cautiously reopening. Maybe it's finally safe to take the kids on a summer trip.

Or maybe not. Traveling and mingling in big crowds are still not the best ideas, and some parts of the world are experiencing surges in COVID-19 cases. Maybe a staycation will work better for a while longer. But there are only so many bike rides, backyard games and walks in the park you can do before you yearn for something more exotic.

On the next rainy day, sit the kids in front of the computer and take them around the world, into outer space or through time at **si.edu/kids**. The site is a section of the Smithsonian's website designed for kids. It's full of links to activities that can be done online or in the real world. They cover a broad range of subjects representing the vast collections of the museum.

The top of the home page has a slideshow of five featured attractions:

■ **The Cheetah Cub Cam** lets you view some of the zoo's latest editions, four cubs born in April, as they romp around their enclosure.

■ **There's an American History Video** series on young people shaking up elections.

■ **The Smithsonian Learning Lab** provides digital access to all kinds of resources and tools for students, teachers and caregivers on a wide variety of topics.

■ **Meet the Animals** is a link to a page featuring many of the zoo's residents. Clicking on an animal brings you to a page with video, photos and interesting information.

■ **Smithsonian 3D** lets you view virtual three-dimensional models of many of the museum's exhibits. You can spin and zoom in on works of art, the skeletons of prehistoric animals, spacecraft and more to examine them from any angle.



KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites

The Cheetah Cub Cam is what first attracted me to the site. There are actually six webcams at the zoo focusing on different animals: black-footed ferrets, cheetahs, naked mole rats, lions, pandas and elephants.

There are problems with the webcams that keep them from living up to their potential. First, they are stationary and only focused on one part of the exhibit. So if the animal is not in front of the camera, you can't see it. The cheetahs were never in front of the camera. I just got an occasional glimpse of them running past the opening of their den.

Second, and this is true even when you visit a zoo in person, sometimes the animals just

aren't doing anything interesting. I visited all of the cameras several times and only saw engaging video a couple times. The pandas were often on camera, but they always seemed to be sitting and eating in the same spot. When the lions were on camera they always seemed to be sleeping. The naked mole rats were always on camera, but they're kind of boring to watch. The ferrets were the only ones who really put on a show. Five or six of them were crowded into their den wrestling, rolling and tumbling over each other like drunken acrobats.

The third problem with the webcams is they starkly illustrate one of the problems with zoos. I couldn't help but feel sad watching a single elephant wander aimlessly around its very unnatural habitat. It seemed utterly bored and lonely. The same is true of the pandas. They are sentenced to a life confined to much too small a space with very little to engage them.

Entire museum available

Below the featured slideshow is a grid with dozens of links to the site's other offerings. Each link has an image, headline and brief description of the feature. They take you to articles, photos, videos, games, quizzes, downloads and more covering science, art, culture, history and nature.

Each link offers a different experience. Many of them take you away from the kids section of Smithsonian's site, so it's a good idea to open them in a new tab. I encountered several interactive features that required using Flash Player, which makes them a bit dated. There's enough engaging content on the site that kids of all ages and interests will find something they like. It's an educational and enjoyable way to spend time.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a staff artist for The Times-Tribune. Share your favorite websites with him at koneill@timeshamrock.com.