

Bugs Do Dirty Work

Thursday, 03 July 2008

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Mary Donaldson/KMXT

There is a business in Kodiak that has a unique method to prepare hunters' big game trophies. The company, which has 50-thousand workers, would be the island's largest employer by far, if the owner actually paid them. Mary Donaldson has more.

(Nat Sound Intro :04s "…fades out.")

That's the sound of thousands of workers toiling away at Ken Hanson's side business, Kodiak Bones and Bugs Taxidermy. He uses Dermestid beetles and their flesh eating larvae to clean wildlife skulls that are later mounted or put on display at educational facilities. Stepping into his beetle shop, you are instantly bombarded with a funky, organic smell. I asked him what produced the unique aroma.

(Bugs 5 :22s "…like worm compost.")

Hanson, who is a fisheries enforcement officer, employs about 55-thousand Dermestid beetles on any given day. The beetle larvae eat only flesh, making them perfect for cleaning bones. Looking around his shop he has over 20 Rubbermaid-style tubs full of the larvae, busy chomping away on halibut heads and herring pieces. He says that is what he feeds them when hunting season has died down. He also has bear and deer skulls that have already been cleaned, degreasing in detergent. Later, they will be bleached using a hydrogen peroxide bath before they either put on a European or wall mount, or returned to the customer without a mount.

He says his business began when he

ordered about 50 beetles over a year ago out of curiosity.

(Bugs 1 :17s “…I said sure.”)

Word of mouth from local bear guides brought in more customers and led Hanson to officially start up his business with the flesh eating larvae. He says Dermestid beetles have been used for cleaning flesh from bones and skulls by universities and museums for a long time. Traditional taxidermy methods for cleaning skulls, such as boiling, damage or destroy fragile bones inside the skull, and using the larvae of the Dermestid beetle is the answer to that problem.

(Bugs 2 :19s “…the skulls.”)

He says the beetles have a longer life span compared to most bugs.

(Bugs 3 :29s “…perpetuate the colony.”)

Besides cleaning animal skulls locally, Hansen says he sells the beetles to many interested buyers across the U.S. He sells about 50-thousand beetles to customers each month through his website, who are either taxidermists or curious folks like he was a few years ago. He is one of about four businesses in the country that sell the Dermestid beetles and has even sent them overseas.

(Bugs 4 :10s “…and Yugoslavia.”)

He says the most interesting sale he’s had lately is a customer whose leg had been severed.

(Bugs 6 :13s “…that was interesting.”)

He says a bear

skull typically takes about one week to clean and costs about 150 dollars. Other types of skulls are priced by their size.

(Nat Sound :05s "..."fades out.)

"m Mary Donaldson.

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HOST TAG: Anyone interested in learning more about the Dermestid beetle or contacting him for his services can log on to his website at bones-and-bugs-dot-com .