

10 Commonly Asked Questions about the Proposed Pre-Historic Trackways National Monument

1. What are "pre-historic trackways"?

Trackways are a series of fossil footprints. The pre-historic trackways in the Robledo Mountains to the west of Las Cruces, New Mexico were formed 280 million years ago when the area was part of a semi-tropical, tidal mud flat.

2. What is the Pre-Historic Trackways National Monument?

On June 29, 2006 Senators Jeff Bingaman and Pete Domenici introduced legislation (S. 3599) to create the Pre-Historic Trackways National Monument in the Robledo Mountains northwest of Las Cruces, New Mexico.

3. How significant is this area from a paleontological standpoint?

The importance and significance of the paleontological resources within the Southern portion of the Robledo Mountains are irrefutable. The trackways have been recognized and displayed at the Smithsonian and Carnegie museums and have also been featured in the New Mexico Museum of Natural History.

In the 1994 Congressional study entitled "The Paleozoic Trackways Scientific Study Report" authors Nicholas Hotton III of the Smithsonian Institution, Spencer Lucas of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, and Adrian Hunt of the University of Colorado at Denver were in unanimous agreement that Robledo Mountain site contains 'the most scientifically significant early Permian tracksites' *in the world.*

4. Why is the area called a "Megatracksite"?

The area being proposed for a national monument is called a "megatracksite" and includes the discovery site and other trackbearing outcrops. The reason why there are no visible fossils exposed is that to open them up before the area is protected would be to expose the fossils to looting and vandalism. Laypeople walking around Robledo Mountains should not expect to see or stumble across sets of trackways--the trackways will need to be carefully excavated by research professionals.

5. Who will manage the Pre-Historic Trackways National Monument?

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will manage the proposed "Pre Historic Trackways National Monument" as part of the National Landscape Conservation System. Currently the BLM has designated a "Research Natural Area" but it is smaller than the protection area recommended by a 1994 Congressional report. The 1994 report asks Congress to enact measures to permanently protect 12 sections or 7,680 acres--an area larger than the 5,387 monument now being proposed

6. What are the threats to the area?

Increasing population numbers, paired with the growth of off-road vehicles (ORVs) as a hobby have become threats to the preservation of Southern New Mexico's wild places. Erosion and noise are two major problems associated with ORV use. Naturally occurring erosion is also a threat, as the tracks are in stone which was once mud. Once exposed the stone is susceptible to weathering and erosion. Another threat comes in the form of a

quarry for stone used in decorative rock walls. Some of the discovery sites have been damaged by quarrying activities and others are close enough to the quarry to be threatened by it. It makes sense to protect special areas now, before more damage occurs, rather than after the fact.

7. Who discovered the trackways?

Jerry MacDonald is credited with being the discoverer of the track ways. Others had found tracks there long before he did, but he was the first to seriously research what the tracks were and the first to uncover whole series of tracks. Previous discoveries had been haphazard and without real scientific inquiry. Jerry MacDonald scoured the area for likely sites, moved tons of rock, and actively pursued both what was known about and what could be learned from the trackways.

8. Will it be necessary to close the area to ORVs to protect the cultural resources there?

Senator Bingaman consulted with the local off road vehicle group before the legislation was introduced. At the request of the off road vehicle group, the legislation includes provisions to allow off road recreation, albeit use that does not harm the paleontological resources within the monument. The bill goes even further to specifically permit the ORV event called the "Chile Challenge." Going forward, the onus will be on responsible ORV users to stay on BLM designated routes so as to not harm the trackways.

9. Why are the trackway sometimes referred to as "pre-historic" and other times referred to as "Paleozoic" trackways?

The Paleozoic era was the approximately 350 million year time span when fish, amphibians and reptiles are believed to have first lived and was prior to the Mesozoic era when early mammals and dinosaurs first appeared. The Permian period at the end of the Paleozoic era is the time frame during which the tracks were made. As "history" is technically the written story of humans, "pre-history" includes anything from before the time of recorded human stories. So, "pre-historic" covers a huge time period, "Paleozoic" is more specific, and "Permian" is actually even more accurate when referring to the trackways.

10. What can we do to help?

The Paleozoic Trackways Foundation is working on becoming a 501 c3 organization. Until that is accomplished the Foundation cannot accept financial contributions that are considered tax deductible. Individuals are welcome to join the foundation and may contact us at backthetracks@yahoo.com. Any support in the form of letters to editors, elected officials, and the BLM is also appreciated.

Additional information is available at www.paleozoictracks.org.