

Protection asked for fossilized footprints

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Protection is being sought for a 290-million-year-old New Mexico archeological site where thousands of ancient fossil footprints have been discovered.

The site was discovered near Las Cruces, N.M., 15 years ago by an amateur geologist and now a group called the Paleozoic Trackways Foundation is seeking protection for the site, the Las Cruces Sun-News reported Monday. The group said it fears without protection the site -- called one of the most important fossil beds of the Paleozoic era -- will be lost to mining, looting and weather.

Spencer Lucas, curator of paleontology at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History, said the discovery of the site altered paleontologists' knowledge about the era.

Lucas said before the trackways in the Robledo Mountains were uncovered, researchers overestimated the number of animals that existed at the time because they had only isolated examples of tracks they had incorrectly assumed were from different animals. In addition, he told the Sun-News scientists had also discovered tracks of insects they had not known existed.

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