

Bringing dinosaur tracks back to light

March 22 2012, By David Drury

The 600 footprints from the Jurassic period displayed beneath a domed exhibit center at Dinosaur State Park tell only part of their story.

Beneath the ground just east of the exhibit center, hidden from public view, lie another 1,500 tracks.

Originally uncovered and cataloged when the footprint trackway was discovered amid worldwide acclaim in August 1966, the tracks were reburied in 1976 to protect them from the ravages of water and weather.

They have not been viewed since.

A group of prominent Connecticut [geologists](#) would like to change that. They want to unearth the tracks and enclose them in a protective, permanent shelter, making them once again available for inspection by scientists and the public.

Their goal is to have the project completed by August 2016, in time for the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the trackway, one of the largest dinosaur track sites in North America.

"There's been a whole generation of scientists who have never looked at them," Dinosaur [State Park](#) Director Margaret Enkler said. "The number of people who have seen the full trackway is getting smaller and smaller."

Enkler and her colleagues will make their case before more than 1,000

geoscientists, teachers and students who were to gather in downtown Hartford beginning Sunday for the Northeastern section meeting of the [Geological Society of America](#). The 200-year-long history of geologic discovery in New England provides a unifying theme for the conference.

Early Jurassic footprints laid down 200 million years ago in ancient lake beds along the central rift valley of Massachusetts and Connecticut were first discovered in the early 1800s. A 19th century Amherst College teacher, Edward Hitchcock, named the scientific study of such fossils ichnology.

"The Connecticut Valley is literally a [treasure trove](#) of Jurassic Age fossils," said Nicholas G. McDonald, a geologist and science educator whose book about Dinosaur State Park, "Window into the Jurassic World," was published in 2010.

Five hundred of the tracks are now enclosed in the Exhibit Center's white geodesic dome. The center features a Jurassic mural and exhibit and a model of dilophosaurus, the carnivore considered likely to have made the tracks.

McDonald said uncovering the buried footprints could renew interest in the park, which is located in Rocky Hill, a suburb of about 19,000 just south of Hartford. The larger trackway would offer accessible field experience for younger scientists and science educators.

"There really is a need today as an educator to get away from the computer. So much science now you do on your laptop, and the thing that turned me on to geology was being outdoors.

"This is not a virtual image of a dinosaur track, but 2,000 actual tracks."

McDonald was among a group of scientists and students present in

November when a narrow, 24-foot trench was dug to see how well the tracks had withstood their reinterment. They were in excellent shape despite a buildup of water from the accidental shut-off of a sump pump.

From the moment of their discovery, great care was taken with the tracks. Bulldozer operator Edward McCarthy was working on the excavation for a new state building when he noticed odd, three-toed footprints on a slab of gray sandstone.

Work was immediately halted, a horde of scientists and students descended on the property and, as additional tracks were excavated, individual specimens were brushed clean and coated with material to prevent fracturing.

To protect them that first winter, the 10- to 16-inch tracks were covered with sheets of plastic, heating cable, layers of sand and mulch, and old tires, according to former state geologist Hugo Thomas, who took part in the original excavation.

Recognized as a Registered Natural Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Dinosaur State Park draws about 50,000 visitors a year to its exhibit center.

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