

The Oregonian

For \$3, Fossil delivers 30 million years

To boost its economy, the town of 460 charges a collecting fee at a popular geological attraction

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FOSSIL -- Is this still Oregon? One of the state's low-key delights is now history, and not just in the paleontological sense.

For decades, you could head to this town of 460, stop at Wheeler High School and head up behind the baseball field to chip away at rocks that might reveal a 30 million-year-old plant fossil.

The three units of the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument to the south and southwest were always off-limits for collecting, but the hillside above the third-base dugout was open to everyone.

What's more, you could take as many fossils as you wanted -- even the metasequoia, or dawn redwood, just designated the state fossil by the Oregon Legislature. And it didn't cost a cent.

But that quaint practice has gone the way of free day use at state parks. In a change that's jolted native Oregonians, you now have to pay a \$3 collecting fee, an interpreter is on-site and you're limited to taking three fossils.

Find something unusual, site interpreter Karen Masshoff gently explains, and you'll be asked to leave it behind as part of a collection.

The move is part of a larger effort by Wheeler County and the city of Fossil to spur economic development by attracting "edu-tourists," travelers who want to learn something while visiting an area, not just be entertained. Wheeler County desperately needs a shot in the arm; it's the least populated in Oregon and has the state's lowest median income.

In Fossil itself, the economic development effort includes tapping -- and charging -- visitors who find their way to the hillside behind the high school.

The fossils were exposed during the leveling of the baseball field in 1949 or 1950. Flat slabs of tan and brown rock, remains of mud at the bottom of an ancient lake bed, lie in clattering piles of rubble.

"A baby could go there and collect the state fossil," exults Bill Orr, a retired University of Oregon geology professor.

"One of the reasons I revere the high school site in Wheeler County is that anyone can go there -- and they do," Orr says. To anyone with a passing interest in geology or paleontology, "it's like a pilgrimage," he says.

But along with promoting the town's natural resource comes the need to manage and preserve it.

Masshoff, the site interpreter, is a retired teacher and medical lab worker with a bent for geology who works out of a fifth-wheel trailer parked on the east side of the high school. Beyond the trailer are a pair of newly built plywood stands -- one labeled "Gift Shop." Metasequoia T-shirts -- they come only in fossil brown -- cost \$15.

Among Masshoff's fossil displays are the distinctive needles of the metasequoia, plus sycamore and alder leaves, pine needles and bits of blossoms and seed pods.

So far, fossil hunters have been agreeable to the fee and the collecting limit, says Masshoff, a contract employee of the Fossil School District. They understand the need to safeguard the hill, she says.

The restrictions don't detract from the sense of wonder at holding in your hands the stony evidence of life that existed long before humans arrived.

"How do we really realize 30 million years?" Masshoff asks. "How do we get our minds around that?"

The high school hillside doesn't contain the animal fossils found at sites within the national monument, but it has a charm of its own.

"I always walk over and have a look at it," says state geologist Vicki McConnell. "Fossil collecting is like any other form of rockhounding -- it's part luck and part having a good calibrated eye for what it is you're looking for.

"Probably the best one hasn't been found yet."

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