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Eastern Oregon town of Fossil calls to eco-tourists

The Paleo Lands Field Center, now under construction, will serve as a hub for exploring "50 million years of life, stories of adaptation and extinction"

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It's been a long time coming -- 30 million to 50 million years, by one way of looking at it. But Sunday afternoon marks the groundbreaking for the Paleo Lands Field Center in Fossil, an eastern Oregon town looking to brighten its future by inviting visitors to revel in the past.

The field center will serve as a hub for tourists exploring the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, including the much photographed Painted Hills. Organizers with the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute say the center will help visitors understand the area's natural history.

Paleontologists prize the fossil beds for their extensive record of plant life and early mammals, buried and preserved under multiple layers of volcanic ash dumped during the rise of the Cascade mountains millions of years ago.

Scientists have been interested in the area for 140 years, but the units of the national monument are widely spaced and it's not unusual for visitors to have broad vistas to themselves.

Fossil itself has only 500 people, and Wheeler County is the least-populated county in Oregon, with about 1,500 residents. Led by Wheeler County Judge Jeanne Burch and assisted by a circle of part-time residents and local business owners, the town has set about luring eco-tourists, visitors who want to learn something.

"The challenge for us is to get people to stay longer and learn more, and to spend more money, which is what eco-tourism is all about," said Richard Ross, board president of the Paleo Lands Institute. Ross, of Portland, is a retired Gresham planner and has a home in the John Day basin.

There's much for the curious to learn. The area has no dinosaur fossils but was home to prehistoric camels, elephants and sabertooth cats, among many other animals. John Day basin fossils provided evidence of the evolution of horses, from four-toed to three-toed to single-hoofed animals.

Before the Cascades blocked the rain, the area was wet enough to grow redwood trees. Fossilized needles of metasequoia trees, also known as dawn redwoods and selected as the state fossil, are commonly found in the public digging grounds above the Wheeler County High School baseball field in Fossil.

The layers of rock hold other lessons, Ross said. "I think there's a greater awareness of the John Day Fossil Beds as not just a neat place to learn about ancient mammals, but also for understanding climate change. There's a very complete record of 50 million years of life, stories of adaptation and extinction, that have become much more relevant in the last two years."

The groundbreaking will be at 2 p.m. Sunday across the street from the Wheeler County Courthouse in Fossil. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., who helped secure \$250,000 in federal money that will help build the center, will turn the first shovel.

Go to paleolands.org for information about the area.

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