

PALEONTOLOGICAL ACCESS TO PUBLIC LANDS - HOW IT WORKS IN WYOMING

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Public lands, administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), often are those that were passed over as too arid, too steep, and too barren for homesteads. But these conditions are ideal for the preservation and discovery of fossils. There are nearly 18 million acres of such public lands in Wyoming alone.

Interest in paleontology has been increasing for many years; professionals, amateurs, and hobby collectors can and do enjoy the public lands in their work and their recreation. During 1995, BLM Wyoming issued 37 Paleontological Resources Use permits for the collection of vertebrate fossils. Under these permits, over 200 individuals of all ages worked along with qualified paleontologists to collect, document, and preserve the fossils they found so that America's natural heritage will have scientific and educational value for many years to come.

Many kinds of fossils that are relatively common may be collected for personal use without a permit, so the BLM has no records of how many people enjoy fossil collecting as a hobby. But it is common to see families, clubs, and individuals collecting petrified wood, ammonites, or gastropods on summer days. Some groups request information on BLM guidelines for fossil collectors and keep the BLM informed about their activities through newsletters and reports.

However, some negative impacts also result from "fossil fever." Careless and even illegal collecting of fossils appears to be increasing, and deprives the American people of a resource that belongs to all of us.

Information provided by paleontologists is used in the BLM land use planning process to prevent damage to important resources. Surface disturbing projects, such as oilfield development and pipeline construction, that are likely to impact fossils are carefully studied. For those few where damage is threatened, field monitors work ahead of or with construction equipment to salvage specimens and data that might otherwise be lost.