



Foundation Document Overview

Agate Fossil Beds National Monument

Nebraska



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of Agate Fossil Beds National Monument is

- to protect the Miocene epoch fossils and associated quarries and related geological phenomena*
- to provide a center for continuing paleontological research and for the display and interpretation of Miocene epoch fossils*
- to curate, exhibit, and protect the James H. Cook–Red Cloud Native American collection*



Significance

Statements of significance are guided by legislation and the knowledge acquired through management, research, and civic engagement. These statements of significance define why, within a national, regional, and systemwide context, the park's resources and values are important enough to warrant national park designation.

- The Great Bone Bed at Agate is world-renowned as one of the earliest discoveries that helped define the Miocene epoch (23 to 5.3 million years ago). The thousands of densely packed bones deposited into an ancient watering hole are revered for their quality of preservation and completeness.
- The discovery of bearded dog dens in the 1980s showed the earliest known denning behavior of carnivores. This and other important discoveries at Agate Fossil Beds National Monument include animals new to science, as well as traces of the actual environments they lived in.
- Daemonelix*, “Devil’s corkscrews,” a name locally given to enormous sandstone spirals—sometimes up to 10 feet tall—fascinated and confounded the early researchers, who developed several theories to explain their origin. It was later determined that these deposits were natural casts of rodent burrows, which provided valuable insight on the burrowing habits of early beavers and their adaptations to the open grassland environment.
- The *Stenomylus* Quarry is unique because it contains multiple skeletons of the tiny camelid (gazelle-like camel), one of the smallest of the North American camels. Other occurrences of *Stenomylus* in the region are limited to isolated specimens. Many of the skeletons are fully articulated and are preserved in detail. The site is thought to be a mass death assemblage.
- The history of research at Agate Fossil Beds National Monument provides important data needed to better understand the climate and ancient mammals that lived during the Miocene epoch. The scientific history includes important examples of cooperation, competition, near misses, rediscovery, and detailed problem solving, all significant components of scientific understanding.
- The Cook Papers provide valuable insights for future generations regarding the development of a 19th-century frontier ranch and the discovery of the fossil quarries and paint an intimate portrait of a long-lasting friendship between Cook and Red Cloud.
- The Cook–Red Cloud Collection, an accumulation of beautiful gifts bestowed on James H. Cook and his family over many years, illustrates the Plains Indian tradition of gift giving and is a symbol of friendship between cultures not often found in the combative settlement of the West.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those resources and values that are critical to achieving the park's purpose and maintaining its significance. They are directly tied to the reason(s) that the park was established. If fundamental resources and values are allowed to deteriorate, the park purpose and/or significance could be jeopardized.

The following fundamental resources and values were identified for Agate Fossil Beds National Monument:

- the spectacular geologic deposits
- the long history of research in the Agate Springs Fossil Quarries and historic Bone Cabin complex
- the materials in the James H. Cook–Red Cloud collection and Cook's papers



- The historic Bone Cabin complex illustrates the time period when Harold Cook and his wife Eleanor homesteaded 640 acres, including Fossil Hills, in order to protect the quarries from uncontrolled development or exploitation. Their desire to work with the paleontologists led to one of the earliest efforts in fossil preservation.

Interpretive Themes

Primary interpretive themes are the most important ideas and concepts of the park that need to be communicated to provide people with opportunities to understand and appreciate the park's resources. These themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose and significance. Primary interpretive themes connect park resources to relevant ideas, meanings, concepts, contexts, beliefs, and values.

- Agate Fossil Beds National Monument provides an example of how the earth has changed in appearance, over eons of geologic time, and how changing conditions altered the ways that animals and humans lived and died on these lands.
- Animals, and more recently humans, have gathered for millions of years on land within the park, providing a window into the interactions of diverse species and cultural groups.
- For more than a century, the park's lands have been the focus of scholarly inquiry, illustrating how the study of science has matured over time and how stewardship has protected a landscape now deemed a national treasure.
- Decades of scholarly investigation not only opened our eyes to other worlds inhabited by different looking creatures, but also revealed multiple lessons that shed light on subjects relevant to the 21st century including extinction, evolution, climate change, and cultural interaction.



Description of Agate Fossil Beds National Monument

Agate Fossil Beds National Monument is an internationally recognized fossil site. The landscape surrounding the fossil beds has been a site of change for millions of years. The relationship among land, weather, ecology, and mammals in the Agate area has been a stage of continual change over time—a meeting place between weather and sediment, the exchange of ideas and memories between cultures, and a site for present generations to make contact with the past. Agate is more than fossils; it is a cultural landscape that has evolved over millions of years and reflects many players—from early mammals roaming the valleys and hills, to nomadic nations of the plains, to life in the West—Agate is truly a place of history.

