



The Wonder of the Dunefield: Delighting Visitors for Over 10,000 Years



Why did you visit White Sands National Monument today? Was it for an amazing sunset or to do a bit of exploring as you hike one of our trails? Did you plan your trip here or did this strange island of white catch your attention as you drove by? Whatever your reasons are, you're in good company. People have been visiting this vast expanse of gypsum sand for thousands of years.

Over 10,000 years ago, humans first entered what we now call the Tularosa Basin, following herds of large animals like mammoths and bison as they roamed across the landscape. They built homes along the shores of Lake Otero, the remnants of which are comprised of the dunefield, Lake Lucero, and Alkali Flat.

The Apache arrived in the basin in the late 1500s. By this time, Lake Otero had long since dried up, its waters giving way to selenite crystals and glistening white sand. For the Apache, the dunefield was a source of sustenance, both spiritual and physical. They gathered plants from its edges and hunted small game.

When Europeans came to the basin, the dunefield was largely overlooked until the town of Alamogordo was established by the railroad in 1898. By that time, some

began looking at the dunes in a new light—the light of commercialism.

A debate soon began over the value of the gypsum sand. Some wanted to capitalize on this amazing resource by mining it and making plaster, bricks, and wallboard. Others saw it as a natural wonder that needed protection and preservation. By 1933, the conservationists won and the most impressive portion of the dunefield was designated as White Sands National Monument by President Herbert Hoover.

On its official dedication day on April 29, 1934, around 4,650 visitors arrived in some 776 vehicles to take part in gala festivities. Since then, it has continued to be a popular destination for locals and tourists alike. Over the years, visitation has steadily increased and the park now sees an average of 500,000 visitors a year.

What makes this place so unique that people will travel thousands of miles—even half-way around the world—to visit the dunes? Perhaps they come to see the unique plant and animal species that have adapted to this harsh environment. Maybe it's the awe inspiring experience of watching this shimmering landscape slowly change colors under a blazing sunset. Most importantly, though... why did you come here?

