

BLM fossils from Montana have a far-reaching impact



Most fossils are in the rocks for millions of years before they are found. Even after they are collected, it can still take many years before they are fully brought to the light of day. Many people do not realize that collecting a fossil is only the first step in a long process of making that fossil fully available for science and education.

This process can be illustrated by a *Triceratops* skull collected about 13 years ago in the Montana badlands of the Hell Creek Formation. In the field, bones are exposed enough to mark their boundaries. Then the rock and fossils are covered with plaster, forming a large package that can be transported back to the lab for further work. A *Triceratops* skull is not small; this one took two large, heavy jackets-- one weighing 1,000 pounds, and the other closer to 5,000.

Staff and budget issues always are an issue at any museum, and the large jackets containing the skull were kept in storage for many years. Recently, however, the jackets were moved to the Virginia Museum of Natural History to be featured as part of its current dinosaur exhibit.

Moving such large specimens is no problem for an experienced museum crew, and the jackets were placed in the perpetration laboratory that is in full view of the visiting public. For the first time in many years, the jackets were opened and the journey of this *Triceratops* took its next steps.

That journey began more than 65 million years ago along the lush banks of a tropical river flowing through what is now eastern Montana. The animal died and was buried in river muds where it remained covered for millions of years. After their discovery, the bones were carefully exposed and jacketed in plaster for their trek across the continent.

After more than a decade in storage, this *Triceratops* is seeing the light of day again. Its bones have been revealed to the amazement of museum visitors, young and old. It will take many months to fully clean the bones and make them available for study or display.

In this way, public fossils from Montana are making an impact in public education thousands of miles away; all in all, another dramatic story for our public fossils.

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The plaster jacket containing parts of a dinosaur skull are moved into the lab in the Virginia Museum of Natural History.



Museum officials begin the painstaking work of working through the plaster jacket containing fossils and rock, carefully cleaning the bones so they can be used in research and education.



Visitors to the Virginia Museum of Natural History marvel at the jacket containing a dinosaur skull from BLM lands of Montana.