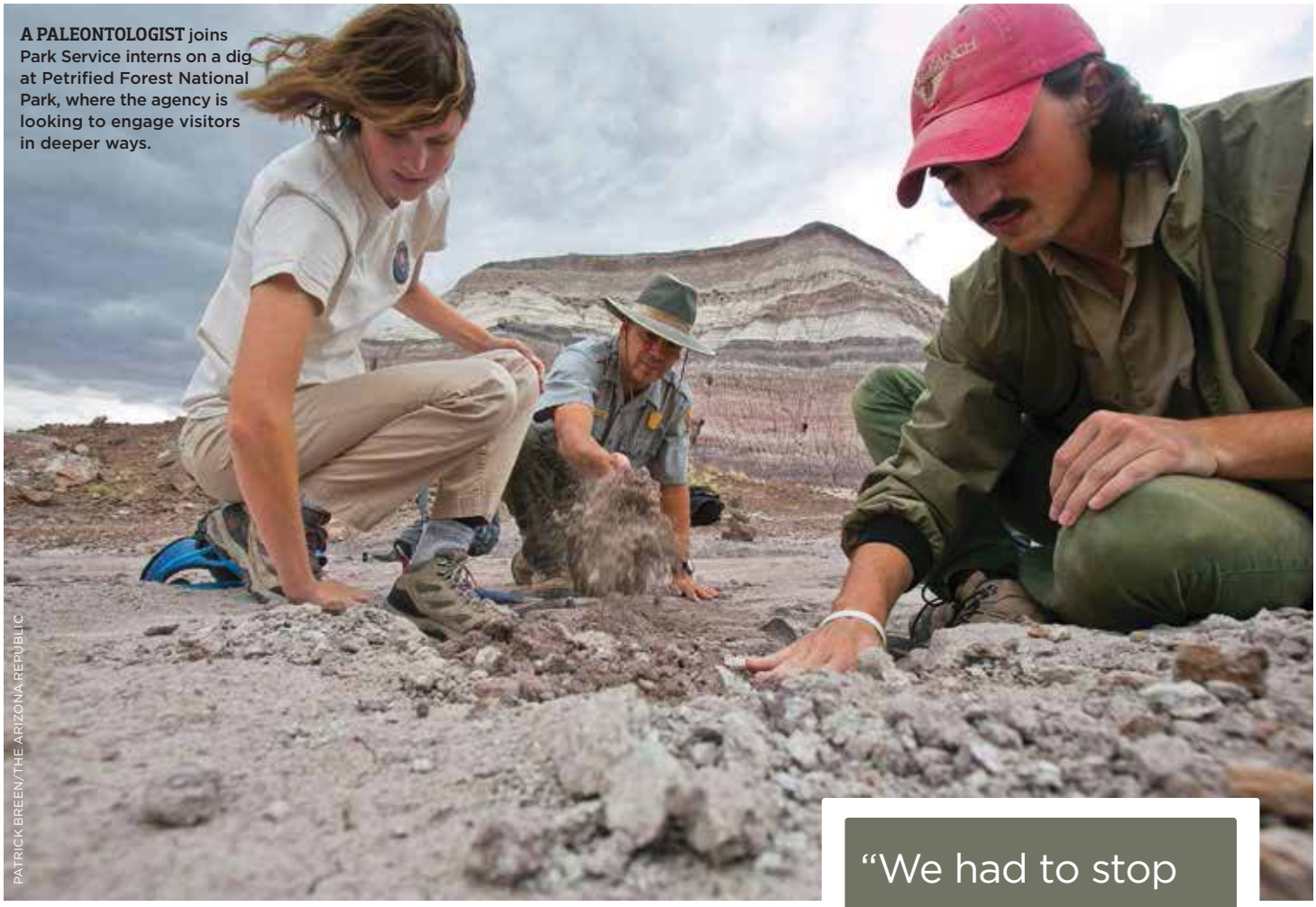


A PALEONTOLOGIST joins Park Service interns on a dig at Petrified Forest National Park, where the agency is looking to engage visitors in deeper ways.

PATRICK BREEN/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Seeing the Forest for the Trees

Petrified Forest National Park starts to accentuate the positive.

> "We had to stop saying, 'No,' start saying, 'Yes,' and change the image of the park."

There is something a little Oz-like about Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park. On Interstate 40, drivers see a nondescript panorama behind signs for the park. But just a few miles in, the landscape turns Technicolor. The strata of the Painted Desert seem to burst with rainbows, and the quartz of millions of pieces of petrified wood—from bitty flecks to giant logs—sparkles in the sunlight.

"We hear it all the time—people are blown away," says Richard Ullmann, chief of interpretation for the park. "If you want to go to one place in the world to see the largest concentration and variety of petrified wood, this is the top of the mountain."

But despite the park's ability to surprise and delight, the experience at Petrified Forest had lost its sheen. For starters, people couldn't enjoy the petrified wood without being reminded, by signage or park rangers, not to take it. There was an exhibit with letters from those who had stolen wood in the past, saying that their lives had since become cursed, and a movie showing the staged arrest of a would-be thief. Upon leaving, visitors were interrogated about whether they had taken anything from the park that day. This tactic continued, even in light of a study that showed most park visitors acted responsibly.

(cont'd)

A dead cat. A broken-down truck. A marriage on the fritz.

Bad luck seems to follow people who steal rocks from Petrified Forest National Park—at least that's what some guilt-ridden visitors believe. So after harboring a filched rock for weeks or years and sometimes decades, they mail the specimens back, often with a remorseful letter attached.

In 2011, artist Ryan Thompson spotted some of the "conscience letters" on a chance visit to the Petrified Forest. Instantly intrigued, he created his art project, "Bad Luck, Hot Rocks," soon after. At badluckhotrocks.com, he regularly posts photographs of the stolen rocks along with regret-filled letters that people have been writing since 1934.

"I am sorry I took this rock. I lied to my mom and dad," one little boy penned. In another, a woman wrote that her husband died in an airplane crash shortly after taking a rock.

"It's easy on the one hand to laugh them off as superstitious, especially as people go through the litany of things that have gone wrong," Thompson says. "But you get to one about a plane crash—something so powerful and real—you have to catch yourself. It has humor and heartbreak simultaneously."

And also redemption. "There's hopefulness in returning these things," he said. "In recognizing this thing is bigger than you and it should really be put back."

Read more about "Bad Luck, Hot Rocks" online at www.parkadvocate.com. *–RM*

"I think the intent was to play on people's guilt," says Superintendent Brad Traver. "And it was effective. "When we focus too much on theft, we begin to close the park off to the visiting public, not showing off its full range of values and not making people feel welcome." And visitation numbers reflected that. "We needed to take a look in the mirror and see how we could reverse that," he says. "We had to stop saying, 'No,' start saying, 'Yes,' and change the image of the park."

Northeastern Arizona's Petrified Forest was set aside as a national monument in 1906 to protect the petrified wood, which began as logs buried in ancient riverbeds more than 200 million years ago. It was named a national park in 1962. But over the years, it became largely a drive-through attraction. Some areas were off-limits to the public, and the feeling that the park was under "lockdown," in the words of one park employee, prevented visitors from lingering and exploring. There was also a rumor that theft was so widespread that no petrified wood remained.

"Even my friends at the Park Service would say, 'What are you going to do about the theft problem?'" says Traver. And that bothered him the most. So from the get-go, he removed the negative signs and edited the arrest scene out of the movie; last year, he put the kibosh on visitor interrogations.

The staff discovered a simple way to show that fossilized wood indeed remains—and simultaneously reinforce the importance of federally protected land. Working with volunteers, the park took on an ambitious photography project, looking at images from the early 1900s, then shooting the same scenes to show how little the landscape has changed. Photographers have produced thousands of high-quality images that the park now uses for exhibits and promotional material.

Part of the park's new approach includes creating more opportunities for visitors, such as packets of historic photographs so people can participate in "rephotography" themselves. The park also now encourages visitors to explore the area at a deeper level by suggesting off-the-path destinations like Jasper Forest, which weren't promoted before. Traver is even toying with the idea of building a campground, so folks could spend the night in the park.

"Now the focus is what it really should be—telling amazing stories associated with the park," says Sarah Hervé, deputy chief of interpretation. "It's been an organic process, but the culture change in the last few years has been incredible."

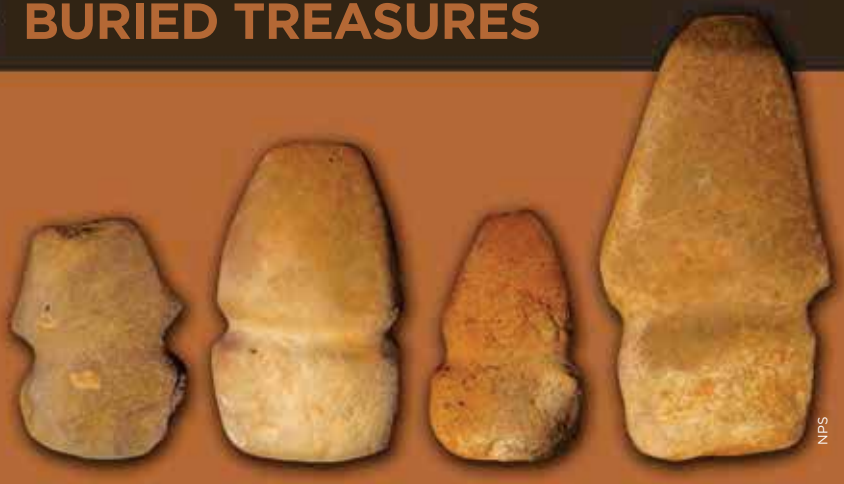
Naturally, visitors sense the new energy. Hikers and travelers leave Petrified Forest and then blog about their experience, spreading the word organically. Traver says these days, he isn't any less vigilant about wood theft, but it's no longer the chief focus. His long-term vision is that of a park that encourages visitors to stay and makes them feel welcome, but he knows it won't happen overnight.

"It's taken a generation for the image to form," he says, "and it may take a generation for it to go away."

—MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

FOUR OF THE SEVEN AXE HEADS discovered on land that was recently added to Petrified Forest National Park.

BURIED TREASURES



NPS

One day last summer park archaeologist Bill Reitze set off in his truck to explore a new section of Petrified Forest. And there, at this previously unexplored site, in a dusty shallow pit in front of some sandstone structures, he discovered a mysterious and rare cache of seven axe heads. Reitze could tell they were hard to produce, made from a volcanic stone that was probably ground and polished for hours. He began asking questions: Who made them? Why were they left behind?

Reitze, who claims to have one of the coolest park archaeologist jobs in the country, relishes such questions about prehistoric human behavior. And these days, he has even more reasons to be enthusiastic about his work—40,000 acres more, in fact. Since Congress authorized an expansion of the park in 2004, which will more than double its size, Petrified Forest has been acquiring archaeologically important land as resources become available. The most recent acquisition was the 4,265-acre McCauley Ranch, purchased last year by the Park Service with the help of The Conservation Fund, the National Parks Conservation Association, and an anonymous donor.

Most exciting for a science park is that 99 percent of the expansion land (and 75 percent of the park's pre-expansion land) has never been surveyed. Last summer's explorations yielded considerably more discoveries than expected; in addition to the axes, staff also found pueblos, pottery, and ceramics.

Every discovery is another clue to painting the big picture at Petrified Forest, a land that's rich in dinosaur fossils and has been inhabited by humans for 13,000 years. "From Ice Age hunters to Rte. 66 roadside attractions, it's a pretty unbroken history," Reitze says. This summer, field crews will head back to explore uncharted lands, and plans are in the works to increase public access so visitors can observe science in action. "It's pretty rare in this day and age," Reitze says, "that we can go out every day and find new archeology sites." *–MK*