



NEWS

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MTA RAIL CONSTRUCTION CONTRIBUTES TO SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

The MTA is building a network of rail lines to decrease congestion, improve air quality, ensure the future economic vitality of Los Angeles County, and add to our understanding of the paleontology of the region.

Say what?

Actually, paleontology isn't part of the MTA's mission, but it is an important by-product of Metro Rail construction.

State and federal laws require the MTA to study and, if feasible, preserve artifacts of natural and human history. Plans for study and preservation are incorporated into the environmental impact review process. The MTA and its predecessor agencies since 1987 have contracted with Paleo Environmental Associates to monitor earthmoving activities and conduct, as their name suggests, conduct paleontological studies.

Since Metro Rail construction began, thousands of items have been identified and several tons of rock have been examined to locate fossils as minute as ancient pollen and as exotic as the bones and teeth of extinct camels and elephants.

"The continuing construction has been a real opportunity for scientific exploration," said Joe Drew, MTA's chief executive officer. "We've found and preserved artifacts that would not even have been uncovered without construction-related earth moving."

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More than 1900 fossils have been recovered, preserved, cataloged and will be turned over to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. These include 56 different types of fish, of which 55 are extinct.

"These specimens are highly significant because they include 31 species not previously identified," said Dr. E. Bruce Lander, president of Paleo Environmental Associates. "Our finds include many first-reported occurrences, first-reported in North America, and oldest-reported. When we look at the modern counterparts of some of these species, it tells us that at one time, the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Vermont Avenue was at least ½ mile under water."

While the marine specimens belong to a geologic period known as late Miocene Epoch (7.2 to 8.6 million years in age), finds of a more recent era also are compelling.

"We recovered the tusk of an extinct Ice Age mammoth during construction of the Wilshire/Western Station, and the bones and teeth of extinct mastodon, horse, camel and bison from the tunnel beneath Hollywood Boulevard just west of Western Avenue," said Lander. "These mammal finds indicate that the seas receded from the Los Angeles basin during the early Pleistocene Epoch, which began 1.85 million years ago."

The most recent finds, in terms of construction and age, are a number of logs discovered during the current excavation of the Universal City Red Line Station. These were found to be 8,800 years old, or just after the end of the Pleistocene Epoch, and the end of the last Ice Age. That period coincided with the extinction of many of the large land mammals now known to have populated the area, thanks to the discoveries made in Hollywood.

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Construction workers at MTA project sites are briefed on what to look for, proper preservation techniques, and are given incentives to turn over any fossils that are uncovered. They work with the trained paleontological consultants that monitor Metro Rail construction sites.

The MTA's commitment to paleontology includes curation services and fees paid to local museums for preservation and storage of resources and associated data. Materials are then available for future study by scientists. Casts of some of the mammal bones are displayed at the MTA library.

MTA subway construction has provided a unique opportunity for researchers to explore areas normally inaccessible to study.

"There's no question that Metro Rail construction has provided us a scientific windfall," said Lander. "It has assisted us in reconstructing the geologic history of the Los Angeles Basin over the past seven to eight million years."

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