

New field center in Fossil shows off area's riches

By [Abby Haight, The Oregonian](#)

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Abby Haight/The

Oregonian Residents of tiny Wheeler County hope Fossil's new Oregon Paleo Lands Institute Field Center draws visitors to learn about the area's geological riches.

FOSSIL -- The new [Oregon Paleo Lands Institute](#) field center stands out bright next to Wheeler County's historic courthouse and the sturdy, comfortable homes that line the narrow streets.

Inside, even the air smells new -- wood cabinets, fresh paint, crisp maps of hikes and bike rides. A small bookstore is in one corner, and an interpretive exhibit of a 12-foot-long sculpture of a plesiosaur, a prehistoric aquatic reptile, dominates most of the room.

The institute rose from the dramatic geology of the area: The [John Day Fossil Beds National Monument](#) and the stunning formations of the Painted Hills and Clarno Palisades. With the field center, dedicated this month, the institute's supporters of geologists and county leaders, ranchers and rockhounds hope to turn ancient history into a tourism-based economy.

"For so many years, timber, mining and ranching were the economy here," said Kevin Campbell, a third-generation John Day Basin rancher who is president of the paleo institute. "What we're really seeing here is the crossroads of the past and the future. You

know, you can either stop here because you have to or you stop because something catches your interest."

Campbell nodded to the field center. "And this is a reason to stop."

About 1,500 people live in [Wheeler County](#). A 2002 study showed it had the state's lowest median household income. The John Day Basin is too remote to lure industry, although it has a growing number of wind turbine projects on its rolling hills.

Nor is it likely to become a tourism hot spot like Bend or Hood River -- which is fine with its residents. Creating a few jobs or bringing in five more tourists daily to spend money can make a big difference.

"There isn't 'big' money to make there -- it's the little things that are going to help," said Alice Trindle, executive director of the [Eastern Oregon Visitors Association](#). "What the Paleo Lands Institute is offering in the John Day Fossil Beds -- there's nothing else like that in the entire world, where there's that gathering of prehistoric time that you can see in such a small area."

Ann Mitchell, the institute's executive director, said the new field center gives the organization an identity -- and a draw for edu-tourism.

"As we grow and develop our education programs and establish a presence, I hope we'll have international scientists come to this area," Mitchell said. "Because this is an incredible place to study climate change."

Ellen Morris Bishop helped build the institute's educational component, including its popular SAGE program that takes schoolchildren into the field on Fridays and Saturdays. She is committed to the institute's mission -- protecting and promoting Oregon's ancient and living landscapes, and supporting the local rural communities, and especially their children.

"It says we're here, and this is what we're about," Bishop said of the field center. "We want to connect people with this landscape in a tangible, tactile way."

Schoolchildren from the nearby town of Mitchell played a big part in the new center, helping create the centerpiece exhibit of a half-size plesiosaur and a book about the world the ancient reptile inhabited.

Mitchell high school students worked with Paleo artist Larry Williams to create the steel plesiosaur sculpture, using math skills while learning design and welding. The younger students worked with Tracy Hubschmitt, the institute's educator, to publish a book and create a seabed for the sculpture.

Institute staff members are working with Fossil schoolteachers to design a spring program for students in town.

"This opens everything up to kids," said Mitchell school superintendent Sue Horton.
"Having that hands-on experience has been really important for our students.

"I think that because we live here, we almost don't appreciate what is in our backyard."

-- *Abby Haight*; abbyhaight@news.oregonian.com