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Chadrad Communications, Inc.
226 Bordeaux St - Chadron, NE 69337
308-432-5545 fax 308-432-5601
E-mail: kcsr@chadrad.com

(Neb.) - Fossil Theft – A Serious Crime with Serious Consequences

By: John Thayer Posted at: 04/26/2012 04:36 PM

CHADRON – Paleontological resources are a fragile and nonrenewable scientific and historic record of life on earth. Once damaged, destroyed, or impaired in any way, their scientific and educational value may be lost or significantly reduced. Fossil collection from public lands is illegal and punishable as a misdemeanor or felony, depending on the level of infraction. Occasionally people are confused because it can be legal on private lands, but only with landowners' permission.

Barbara Beasley is a multi-regional Paleontologist for the U.S. Forest Service and one of the lead federal professionals with expertise in fossil resource management across public lands. With Forest Service field staff and Federal Law Enforcement Officers' assistance, Beasley helps investigate and prosecute fossil thefts on federal lands. Each year scores of paleontological sites are disturbed and fossil thefts or vandalism are investigated. Evidence includes paleontological sites that are 'torn up' with holes in the ground, scattered cigarette butts, tools or other debris around these locations.

"Some fossil removal is due to people's curiosity and actually done innocently," Beasley reports, "however fossil theft from public land is a growing crime, but unfortunately difficult to enforce because of the vast acres of remote areas where many of these paleontological resources are located."

Collection is based on three different types of resources on the Nebraska National Forests & Grasslands. Plant categories include petrified wood, and collecting up to 25 pounds per day is allowable, and up to 250 pounds per year. The invertebrates include anything without a spine, usually with a shell or hard exterior not made of bone. Beasley said, "A 'reasonable' amount of invertebrate fossil collection is allowed, and would be intended only for personal use," with the federal official determining how much is reasonable. The third category includes vertebrate animals - animals with a spine or backbone. The collection of vertebrate fossils on federal lands is prohibited.

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