Where the West is Fun

San Diego County Fair

Roundup for gem minerals of the West

by Lisbet Thoresen, Public Lands Representative for SDMG and PLAC – South Chair, CFMS

The Mojave Desert has many collecting areas beloved to Rockhounds that are now within the footprint of the Mojave Trails National Monument (MTNM). Since the 1990s, repeated legislative efforts to protect the area from commercial exploitation failed, so finally Senator Dianne Feinstein asked President Obama to designate it as a national monument, which he did on February 12, 2016.

The public has a limited awareness of the beautiful and varied gem minerals found in the California desert or the deep affinity hobby collectors feel for this oasis of collectible gem minerals.

Other Stakeholders love the desert too, while still others see economic potential in it. Consequently, the Mojave Desert has been a battleground of competing values for as long as anyone can remember. Now, however, the conflict has narrowed and focused on Mojave Trails, specifically. It may be downsized significantly to accommodate commercial interests, which is being hotly contested in a renewed battle that may go on for some time.

Where does that leave Rockhounds?

Between a rock and a hard place?

If Mojave Trails is downsized to make way for commercial development and the building of utility-scale projects, hobby collecting almost certainly will be drastically curtailed. Fences will go up, and Rockhounds, as well as other recreational users, will be shut out.

Conversely, areas that remain in the monument will be under management, and historically, public lands with protective designations are managed according to very restrictive guidelines. To alleviate the burden of cost and human resources, closure of secondary roads and unmapped trails has been the rule rather than the exception. So, unless the management plan for Mojave Trails, which has yet to be drafted, explicitly accommodates hobby collecting and keeps roads and trails open, Rockhounds could lose access to collecting areas.

California BLM and BLM’s Desert District Advisory Council (DAC) is keenly aware that the Mojave Desert is hallowed ground for Rockhounds, so they appreciate the expectations invested in explicit
accommodations being written into the management plan for Mojave Trails – whether it remains intact or is downsized. Rockhounds could enhance their own prospects of getting more of what they want in the management plan, if they are willing to cultivate comity and mutual support with other Stakeholders and if they are willing to invest more energy into elevating public awareness about what’s at stake.

In a perverse way, perhaps, the timing could not be better for this particular public lands crisis – the national monuments review ordered by President Trump on April 26th has propelled what might be an otherwise obscure topic to high visibility with the public. And the public responded to the review by overwhelmingly supporting the preservation and designation of more national monuments (see the previous article). DOI never received more comment letters on any other issue previously – ever.

So, is there any reason the public cannot or will not support hobby collecting on lands with protective designations, if they understand better what responsible hobby collecting values are and where access is threatened? Some groups like The Sierra Club may never yield any concessions, but what about other groups, and what about John Q. Public?

The 2017 San Diego County Fair provided both an ideal venue and the ideal theme – “Where the West is Fun” – to address the issue. It provided opportunity (as it does every year) to reach a lot of people and show them extraordinarily beautiful gem minerals, but this year, gems and minerals found in western localities were showcased – 21 of the 22 land-based national monuments under review, including Mojave Trails, are located in western states.

In collaboration with lifelong Rockhounds Bill Depue, Vivian and Danny Watts, and John Pickett, this author (LT) made an educational exhibit showcasing “Agates and Jaspers from Mojave Trails National Monument.” We invited BLM staff and several conservation groups to visit the Gems, Minerals & Jewelry Dept. at the Del Mar Fairgrounds where they could see firsthand why we love gems and minerals and collecting.

Frazier Haney, Conservation Director of Mojave Desert Land Trust, brought his family from Joshua Tree, and Sheara Cohen, California Desert Public Lands Representative for The Wilderness Society, travelled from Oakland to see the show. They were bowled over – they spent three hours, asking questions – lots of questions – and there was lots of ooh-ing and aah-ing over the specimens, the lapidary, the jewelry. We won over Frazier’s 2 1/2 year-old daughter Lily, too. She made a bee-line for the sandbox to sift for a polished gem treasure. A future Rockhound? Hope so.

“Rockhounding in the California Desert District has been a family activity and hobby for generations of Californians. The BLM is committed to focusing on rockhounding, and other recreational activities, in the development of the management plan for Mojave Trails National Monument. Input from the rockhounding community will be essential in helping us identify appropriate management actions that balance access with resource protection.”

– Kyle Sullivan, MTNM manager, BLM
San Diego Mineral & Gem Society, Inc.

Lisbet Thoresen and Frazier Haney inspect the exhibit featuring Agates and Jaspers self-collected and carved by Bill Depue, Vivian and Danny Watts, and John Pickett.

Jamie Haney looks on as daughter Lily selects a polished gem treasure from the sandbox.

Agates and Jaspers, with all their varied colors and patterns, are endlessly awe-inspiring, and the act of personal discovery – finding an exceptional specimen – is a thrilling experience. No less edifying is studying, sharing, and displaying minerals, and for many Rockhounds there is nothing more gratifying than carving lapidary objects from self-collected specimens.

Bill Depue (age 91) and Jonathan Davis (age 8) are lifelong Rockhounds; although, Bill has been doing it a little longer – he has been going out to the desert nearly every weekend since he was 15 years old. Jonathan got an early start – Bill took him out on his first rock collecting expedition when he was 17 months old. Asked what he looks for, Bill says, “I look for beauty.”

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The “rough” and “cut” Agates and Jaspers on display here originated from just a few of the many historic collecting areas within the Mojave Trails National Monument, primarily the Cady Mountains and part of Lavic Siding.

Preserving Rockhound Habitat on Public Lands

The Desert Renewable Conservation Plan (DRECP) is the most ambitious land use amendment in California history. It is a programmatic “guideline” for administering 22.5 million acres of public and private lands in California’s deserts (through 2040). The Record of Decision for Phase I of the DRECP was signed on September 14, 2016. The DRECP’s focus concentrated on conservation and recreational values of 10.8 million acres within DRECP’s scope. The Record of Decision for Phase I of the DRECP was signed on September 14, 2016.

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