

The Dinosaur Diamond Partnership: A Regional Initiative Millions of Years in the Making

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Scientists acclaim western Colorado and eastern Utah as having some of the richest fossil-bearing localities in the world, some of the fossils being approximately 200 million years old. Both the largest and smallest dinosaurs known to science lived within the Dinosaur Diamond region.

Paleontologists have predicted that within the Dinosaur Diamond, scientists and volunteers will be busy with discoveries and excavations for the next 500 years. We are talking about the real *Jurassic Park* or *Lost World*.

The Dinosaur Diamond Partnership, which recently won a Colorado Tourism Award, was begun by the city of Fruita, Colorado, in the spring of 1996. The purpose of the partnership is to build cooperative tourism marketing around a dinosaur theme by linking the world-class fossil resources of eastern Utah and western Colorado. This effort already is leading to the systematic marketing of these resources to a national and international marketplace.

Small communities in western Colorado and eastern Utah have used an important part of their heritage and natural assets to attract tourists and work to build sustainable communities.

The major Dinosaur Diamond communities are Delta, Dinosaur, Fruita, Grand Junction, and Rangely in Colorado and Moab, Price, and Vernal in Utah, with another nine, smaller communities participating. The Dinosaur Diamond also is home to some of the best Indian rock art in the country, as well as many other natural and scenic resources.

The highlights of this diamond-shaped region are linked by a 550-mile circular tour designated in 1998 by the states of Colorado and Utah as the Dinosaur Diamond Prehistoric Highway. It is Colorado's 22nd Scenic and Historic Byway. The two primary goals of the Dinosaur Diamond are (1) to expand economic opportunity through the promotion of paleontological resources, with an ultimate goal of developing a sustainable tourism industry; and (2) to protect and preserve these prehistoric assets.

Building Sustainable Tourism

This collaborative effort was designed to promote the economic development of this mostly rural and economically struggling region. In the past, many of the Dinosaur Diamond communities have been hurt by the boom/bust cycles in energy development, including the major energy bust that occurred in the 1980s. An example of this impact was the reduction of 300 employees at the Landmark Refinery in Fruita, which took the city to the brim of bankruptcy in 1989.

Many of the Dinosaur Diamond communities now are looking to tourism development as a way to diversify and stabilize their local economies. Current projects include: designation of the Flaming Gorge Scenic Byway north of Vernal; development of a park that will cater to prehistoric-fossil enthusiasts in Dinosaur; expansion of the Museum of Western Colorado in Grand Junction; designation of the Canyon Pintado Historic District near Rangely; and paleontological dig sites close to

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Delta, Price, and Moab.

Fruita has taken the lead in tapping the tourism market, and not only by initiating the Dinosaur Diamond Partnership. Another successful Fruita tourism project has been the Fruita Fat-Tire Bike Festival, which has made the city a mountain bike destination similar to Moab, Utah. It also has resulted in Fruita's being named one of the top 10 mountain bike communities in the United States by *Bicycling* magazine. Funding for these projects has come in part from the imposition of a 3 percent lodging tax in 1996.

All of these activities have enabled Fruita to diversify its economy with what is generally considered clean industry and to keep it from developing solely as a bedroom community for its larger neighbor, Grand Junction. It also has helped this small community of 6,000 to create a unique identity for itself, to enhance community pride, and to develop an optimistic vision of its future.

In the early 1990s, Colorado's residents voted to do away with the state's tourism tax, a tax that had enabled the

state to be competitive as the result of an approximate \$12 million annual tourist marketing program. Thanks to this program, Colorado had stood near the top in the funding of tourism marketing. Following the election, and the reluctance of the state legislature to fund anything more than a minimal state tourist marketing program, Colorado now is close to the bottom in funding for state tourism marketing and has lost the competitive edge and market share it once enjoyed.

In part, the loss of a strong state tourism marketing program has been masked, especially on Colorado's Western Slope, by the rapid growth and expanding convention business on Colorado's Front Range. In fact, many western Colorado communities have seen decreases in tourist industry revenues in recent years. As a result, local organizations have had, more than ever, to rely on creative and innovative partnerships like the Dinosaur Diamond Partnership, if the local economies in western Colorado and eastern Utah were to flourish.

Currently, it is estimated that outside visitors to paleontological attractions in Colorado add a minimum of \$75 million to the economy each year, most of which comes from the public use of or public benefit from paleo resources on federally managed lands. It is thought that the popularity of the dinosaur theme has the potential to attract larger numbers of people to the entire region.

Heritage Tourism Can Make a Difference

The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines "heritage tourism" as "travel to historic and cultural attractions to learn about the past in an enjoyable way." A form of this phenomenon is the discovery of sites of unique character and history—including natural, scenic, ancient, and cultural attractions.

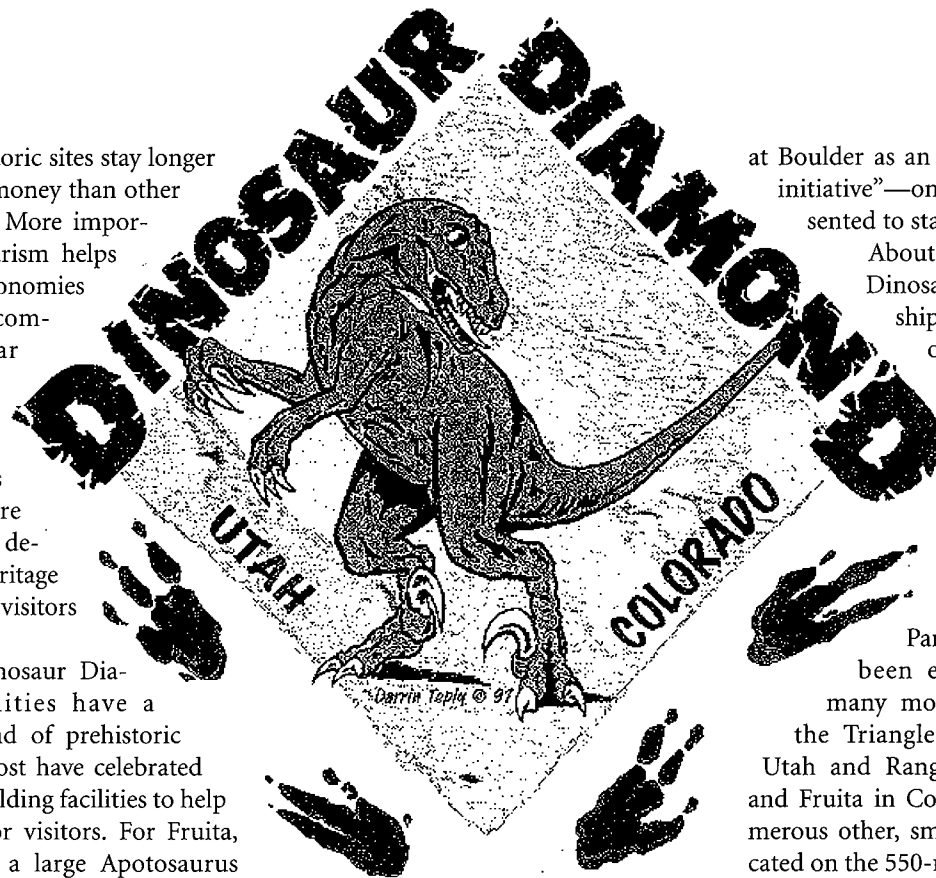
According to the *1997 Report on Cultural and Historic Tourism* published by the Travel Industry Association of Amer-

ica, visitors to historic sites stay longer and spend more money than other kinds of tourists. More important, heritage tourism helps diversify local economies and preserve a community's singular character. However, a major challenge with such tourism is working to ensure that it does not destroy the very heritage that attracts the visitors in the first place.

All of the Dinosaur Diamond communities have a strong background of prehistoric resources, and most have celebrated these assets by building facilities to help interpret them for visitors. For Fruita, the discovery of a large Apotosaurus skeleton at "Dinosaur Hill" almost 100 years ago catapulted the city into national prominence in paleontological circles. This giant lizard is currently on display at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Nearly 300 major dinosaur localities exist within a 15-mile radius of Fruita, as around some other Dinosaur Diamond communities.

The most recent interpretive facility to be developed in the Dinosaur Diamond is the Devil's Canyon Science and Learning Center, now known as the Dinosaur Discovery Museum. This facility was opened in Fruita in 1994 and is a partnership between Fruita and the Dinamation International Society. This \$2.4 million public/private partnership showcases the vast fossil resources and spectacular geology of the area as it preserves and protects an important part of the community's heritage.

The 22,000-square-foot Dinosaur Discovery Museum is owned by the city and operated by Dinamation as a 501(c)(3) corporation. It is located within a burgeoning two-mile tourist and commercial corridor between Interstate 70 and the Colorado National Monument. Visitors from throughout



the world—approximately 75,000 in 1998—are able to gain an appreciation for these resources through viewing and interacting with 15 lifelike robotic dinosaurs, hands-on interactive exhibits, a working paleontology lab, and educational programming.

With the addition of the museum in Fruita, another science and learning facility joined the previously existing five major paleontology interpretive centers in the Dinosaur Diamond. Its presence underscores the fact that there are more such facilities in close proximity within the Dinosaur Diamond region than anywhere else in the world.

A Successful Regional Partnership

The Dinosaur Diamond Partnership received two awards in 1998. In August, it was the recipient of the Governor's Smart Growth and Development Award in the "public/private partnership" category. In October, at the annual Colorado Travel and Tourism Conference, it received a Chancellor's Tourism Award from the University of Colorado

at Boulder as an "outstanding regional initiative"—one of three awards presented to state tourism projects.

About a decade before the Dinosaur Diamond Partnership, there was an effort to organize what was known as the "Dinosaur Triangle," which was limited to Vernal and Price in Utah and Grand Junction in Colorado. The Dinosaur Diamond Partnership, however, has been expanded to include many more communities than the Triangle, including Moab in Utah and Rangely, Dinosaur, Delta, and Fruita in Colorado, as well as numerous other, smaller communities located on the 550-mile tour route.

Some 50 public and private sector organizations from western Colorado and eastern Utah were invited to participate in the first meeting in Fruita, with 50 to 60 persons attending, including representatives of small towns and city governments, county governments, state agencies, federal land management agencies, chambers of commerce, private businesses, travel councils, museums, and a variety of associations.

Attendees at this initial meeting emphasized the value of collaboration and the fact that there truly is strength in numbers. Since this initial meeting, the Dinosaur Diamond Partnership meetings have rotated among the primary communities in Utah and Colorado, with meetings averaging approximately 40 participants.

One of the first major accomplishments of the partnership was designation of the Dinosaur Diamond Prehistoric Highway in both states. In Utah, this action required approval by the state legislature, while in Colorado it required approval by both the Colorado Scenic and Historic Byway Commission and the Colorado Transportation Commission. As a part of the designation pro-

cess, a memorandum of understanding was executed by some 45 organizations, the purpose of which was to provide overall direction for the partnership, as well as policies relating to the responsibility of preserving and protecting these valuable prehistoric resources.

Lessons and Milestones

Experiences encountered in the development of this partnership have included operation without a formal organization and its accompanying bylaws; the difficulties of having a minimal budget and no staff; development of an equitable budgeting formula from the total absence of one; geographical distances that make meetings one-day events for many attendees; political issues that have included the need to transform some previously competitive relationships into cooperative ones; continuously changing players from some communities; pessimism left over from past efforts to organize the Dinosaur Triangle; conflicts of interest arising out of the public versus private components of the partnership; the importance of inclusiveness of membership; and the criticality of maintaining partner motivation and overall momentum.

A recent accomplishment, which will enable the Dinosaur Diamond Partnership to maintain its momentum in 1999, was the awarding of a \$116,000 TEA-21 (Transportation Efficiency Act for the 21st century) grant in late 1998. TEA-21 funds will be used to upgrade the interim management plan, which covers resource management, highway safety and management, marketing, promotion, and interpretation activities. Funds also will enable a new signage plan and the purchase and installation of signs along the entire 550-mile tour route.

Other accomplishments that have enabled overall momentum have included the adoption of a logo; the development of a rack card; the procurement of a couple of \$5,000 grants; a familiarization tour for writers from outside the region; the development of a private sector

regional journal based on the paleontological theme that helps promote the Dinosaur Diamond; an Internet home page; and an innovative passport brochure that acts as a guide for people visiting the Dinosaur Diamond.

The success of the passport brochure has been especially gratifying, in that we have documented cases of visitors who completely changed their vacation plans once they had discovered the Dinosaur Diamond, then went on to enjoy what they described as their "most educational and rewarding vacation ever."

Current projects include incorporation as a nonprofit organization with a 501(c)(3) designation; a look at different ways in which technology can be used to meet both current and future needs; a variety of team-building activities; resolution of trademark and copyright issues that may lead to future licensing opportunities; submittal of a second TEA-21 application for interpretive displays; and submittal of an application for All-American Road status in 1999. We hope that the uniqueness of the Dinosaur Diamond Partnership and the strong commitment of its partners will sustain the success of the last several years.

As a part of this effort, the partnership received invaluable technical assistance from John Sem, a tourism specialist with the Colorado Center for Community Development and the University of Colorado at Boulder, who died unexpectedly this past December. Assistance aided in the development of action plans, marketing studies, an interim management plan, the completion of Colorado and Utah prehistoric highway applications, and the TEA-21 grant application.

Forging Partnerships

Fruita has had considerable success in forging extraordinary cooperative partnerships among business, government, and community groups, spawning numerous successful economic and community development initiatives that have helped Fruita to establish a new vision and achieve a major fiscal turnaround.



High-Priority Target Markets

It is believed that people in these target markets will have an interest in visiting Dinosaur Diamond in Colorado:


- Dinosaur enthusiasts.
- Adventure and outdoor enthusiasts.
- Drivers of cars in pass-through traffic on Interstate 70, State Highway 40, and State Highway 1191.
- Families with young children.
- Travel and tourism mass media marketers.

In addition to the target markets, developmental markets are considered to be national and international in scope.

An excellent example has been the innovative public/private partnership that resulted in the Dinosaur Discovery Museum, a catalyst that generated some \$10 million in new tourist commercial development and the construction of a new state park with campground facilities along the Colorado River in Fruita beginning in early 1999. All of this was done without the city's having to go into debt.

The museum is an excellent model of how a community can leverage limited funds by providing seed capital and then creating an environment supportive of additional investment by others. The museum has become not only a source of revenue for the community but also a strong economic engine for other developments.

Fruita is the only community in Colorado to receive the Governor's Smart Growth and Development Awards in

1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998, each time on the basis of strong partnerships. The whole process has enabled the city to develop its own identity and to emerge out of the shadow of its larger neighbor, Grand Junction. Taking this initiative also has built positive relationships with all types of other organizations, which will no doubt be an asset in future endeavors. 

John Schneiger is city manager of Fruita, Colorado.