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Local officials of Waco, Texas, are hoping the site, which has yielded 24 Columbian mammoths, will become part of the National Park Service attracting thousand of visitors. The mammoths were discovered in 1978.

By Nick Simonite, Waco Tribune Herald/AP

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Waco wants mammoth site to have big appeal

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By Mike Copeland and Wendy Gragg, Waco Tribune-Herald

WACO, Texas — Mammoth bones may draw tourists to Waco, but just how mammoth their impact will be is anyone's guess at this point.

Even so, some are betting that tourists attracted to the Waco Mammoth Site now on track to be part of the National Park Service may do more than just eye fossils. They may eat a meal or two, buy fossil fuels, even spend the night if they want to see just how life has evolved since mammoths walked the region 70,000 years ago.

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By Nick Simonite, Waco Tribune Herald/AP

Baylor University collections manager Anita Benedict answers questions while giving a tour of the mammoth bones located near the Brazos River outside of Waco, Texas.

"I think it has tremendous national and even international appeal," said Mayborn Museum director Ellie Caston. She said she has heard visitor estimates of 50,000 a year "all the way up to 300,000."

Waco's mammoth site along the Bosque River, discovered in 1978, is the largest known concentration of prehistoric mammoths perishing from a single event, in this case a massive mudslide. Besides 24 Columbian mammoths, site excavations have revealed a prehistoric camel and a large cat.

The National Park Service recently announced the site meets its criteria to be included in its park system, but questions remain about who will ultimately oversee the site and how. The Waco Mammoth Foundation has more than \$1 million committed in its \$3 million fundraising campaign to build the project's first phase, which includes a visitors center, roads and a climate-controlled pavilion to protect the bones.

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For now, Baylor University's Mayborn Museum serves as caretaker for both the remains and the site.

One unique draw is that the Waco Mammoth Site is not in a distant corner of a rugged, sprawling park but, rather, comparatively easy to reach.

"I believe people will come to Waco just to see the mammoth site," says Jim Vaughan, president of the Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce. "I've been to places to visit national parks, and that was the only reason I went. That (National Park Service) sign will pull people off the interstate, and they'll do other things while they're here."

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Holly Ferrell, who manages the Clarion Hotel at South Fourth Street and Interstate 35, says the site's appeal to researchers and educators "could far outweigh its tourism value."

Yet others see its very marketability caught up in the continuing research likely to center on the prehistoric site.

"I think the mammoth site has tremendous potential if it can be marketed to the audience on Interstate 35," says Byron Johnson, executive director of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame. He says it will generate even more excitement if Baylor continues to perform research there.

"If it's static, I don't think it would have quite the impact," Johnson says. "People like to see activity."

They also like authenticity, Johnson says, adding that visitors to the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame seem to enjoy seeing the real Texas Rangers stationed at Ranger Company F there.

Greg McDonald, a National Park Service paleontologist who visited the site recently, doesn't think authenticity will be any problem.

In his mind's eye, he sees an expanse of plain, stretches of grass in place of cement and the ancestral rivers of the Bosque and Brazos flowing nearby. There are no humans, no cars. The only traffic: Small antelope, sabre-toothed tigers and Columbian mammoths making their way into Oklahoma and Kansas in the summer and back to Texas come winter.

"How many people have a herd of mammoths in their backyard?" says McDonald, who wants Wacoans to picture this scene and get excited about the mammoth site.

Gloria Young, a fundraiser for the mammoth project, says the site "is a double-barrel project that will tweak the interest of little budding scientists from this area but is also a fabulous tourism opportunity. If we get National Park Service status, that puts us on all the literature and maps and gives us that marker on I-35."

Phil Adkins, immediate past president of the Waco Restaurant Association, says the mammoth site will stimulate the economy if it can accommodate groups and prompt overnight stays.

Day trips bringing school-age youngsters to Waco are fine, he says, "but what we look for is the overnight customer."

The mammoth site should solidify Waco's reputation as a family-friendly place to visit or hold a convention, says Liz Taylor, executive director of Waco's visitor and tourism service.

Besides the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame & Museum, Waco is home to such tourist attractions as the Texas Sports Hall of Fame & Museum and the Dr Pepper Museum.

Taylor adds, "The mammoth site could open an area of conventions on the education and research side that we've never hosted."

Waco and McLennan County already benefit from travel-related commerce. For 2005, the last year for which figures are available, it supported 4,860 jobs and generated \$5.5 million in local taxes, according to figures provided by the state.

Cameron Park Zoo attracts about 250,000 visitors a year, and director Jim Fleshman says it would seem natural to link the zoo and the mammoth site in a marketing campaign.

Even so, he believes he has something the mammoth pit lacks.

"Our elephants are alive," he joked.

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