

Salkhan Fossil Park cries for protection

The Salkhan Fossil Park is located 12 km from Robertsganj town on the Varanasi–Shakti Nagar highway in the Salkhan village in Sonebhadra district of eastern Uttar Pradesh, India. It is one of the most important destinations to unearth the Earth's geological and biological past and is an evidence of the emergence of life on Earth. The fossils found here are the oldest of their kind in the world making the park an invaluable possession not only for India but also for the entire world.

The Salkhan Fossil Park, a 'Geological Heritage' has etched a mark on the international map owing to its old collection of fossils. American scientists estimate that the fossils in the park are nearly 1500 million years old and date back to the Mesoproterozoic period. They also claim that the park is much older and is thrice larger than the Yellowstone National Fossil Park in the United States^{1,2}.

The fossils appear as rings on the boulders (Figure 1) and are scattered in



Figure 1. Fossil rings on boulders in the park. Photo courtesy: District Informatics Officer, Sonebhadra.

the Salkhan Fossil Park, which is spread over an area of about 25 hectares in the Kaimoor Wildlife range and comes under the jurisdiction of the state forest department. A news item in the regional daily, *Hindustan* (Hindi) in August 2001 for the first time drew the attention of many. Later in 2002, Bhagwan Shankar, the then district magistrate of Sonebhadra formally inaugurated the park. Thereafter, an International Workshop was organized in December 2002 which witnessed participation of 42 delegates from both India and abroad. An internationally renowned Canadian Geologist H. J. Hofmann was impressed by the Salkhan Fossil Park. He stated that nowhere in the world have there been such beautiful and clear fossils².

Although the Salkhan Fossil Park houses exclusive fossils, not much attention has been given to its conservation and protection. Unlike the Yellowstone Fossil Park, it is not frequented by visitors. On an average, the Yellowstone generates revenue of about Rs 300 crore annually through 4 million visitors visiting the park. In contrast, the Salkhan Fossil Park is visited by a handful of researchers and reporters. Fossils found in Salkhan are algal stromatolites, the oldest fossils found on Earth. These sedimentary structures or stromatolites consist of laminated carbonate or silicate rocks produced over geologic time by trapping, binding or precipitation of sediments by groups of micro-organisms, primarily cyanobacteria (blue green algae), which are also evidence of the primitive (prokaryotic) forms of life.

Despite the importance of the Salkhan Fossil Park, the park is neglected due to the apathetic attitude of the local admini-

stration and ignorant locals. The fossils in the park are unprotected and the state government or concerned officials have failed to make necessary arrangements. The barricading wires surrounding the fossil park have been stolen, due to which the fossil park is open to animal grazing. The locals traverse through the park making the fossils vulnerable to damage. Lack of security has also seen smugglers plunder the park's wealth. Fossils have been destroyed using hammers. Further, illegal mining in the area is an additional threat.

An attempt was recently made by the state forest department to construct a road connecting the fossil park with the highway. However, it has not helped in reviving the park. The location of the park and area being infested by Naxal activity, poverty and unemployment have been responsible for the deplorable condition of the park. It is therefore a matter of serious concern and needs immediate attention. To address the problems, the park should be developed as a tourist spot or declared as 'National Geological Heritage'. Development of Salkhan Fossil Park as a tourist spot may help generate revenue and open job opportunities for the locals.

1. <http://sonebhadra.nic.in/Fossils.htm>

2. Dainik Jagran (Varanasi edition), 3 April 2012, p. 7.

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