



## Brief History of White Sands National Monument



~ OPENING WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT NEAR ALAMOGORDO, NEW MEXICO, APR 29, 1934. 4000 PEOPLE PRESENT - OLD TIMERS INFO BY 60ND ~

The bright white gypsum dunes of White Sands National Monument are striking. Covering 275 square miles and in places rising taller than a three story building, the dunefield can be seen from space. It is home to five endemic species and many plants and animals with unique adaptations. Throughout its varied history, the white sands have remained intact. Although gypsum is commonly used for industrial purposes, today our dunefield is protected by presidential proclamation. Sand and other resources cannot be removed. This ensures the ecosystem will stay intact for future generations to study and enjoy!

### Pre-monument Days

Although the dunefield has been here between 7,000-10,000 years, it only became a national monument fairly recently. Even then, it took thirty-five years and numerous attempts to protect this national treasure. In the early 20th century, multiple commercial interests attempted to

mine these gypsum dunes; however, none of these attempts were successful due to the low market value of unprocessed gypsum sand. In the 1920's, locals began to understand the uniqueness of the dunes and viewed the dunefield as profitable in another way.

### Monument Designation

The White Sands dunefield fit the description of what the National Park Service sought in prospective sites: "economic worthlessness and monumentalism." The area had already sparked scientific interest with the first published research occurring in scientific journals in 1870. However, the formation of White Sands National Monument took time and support from many people. The most famous supporter and local "father" of White Sands was Tom Charles, an Alamogordo resident and businessman. Mr. Charles was

not the first to suggest including White Sands in the National Park system; however, he enthusiastically supported the idea and wrote to National Park Service officials and congressmen. Mr. Charles got his wish in the last days of President Herbert Hoover's administration when Hoover declared White Sands a national monument under the Antiquities Act of 1906. Presidential Proclamation No 2025 (47 Stat. 2551) established the monument and set aside 142,987 acres for its "additional features of scenic, scientific, and educational interest."

### A Growing Attraction

Even before White Sands was declared a national monument, the area was a popular picnicking location. It was no surprise when there were over 4,000 people in attendance at the opening day ceremony on April 29, 1934. Visitation continued to increase, with an estimated 34,000 people visiting in the first year. It was clear White Sands needed facilities to accommodate visitors' needs for restrooms, water, and information on the history and

formation of the dunes. Plans for the construction of a visitor center with a museum, restrooms, residences for park staff, an administration building, and maintenance shed began in 1935. Funding and labor for the construction came from the largest agency of President Roosevelt's New Deal, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). These facilities were completed in 1938 and are still in use today.

## A New Neighbor

Beginning in 1942, only months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order #9029, which created the 1,243,000 acre Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range. Following the order, soldiers were even allowed to practice tank maneuvers inside the monument's boundary. By 1945, the military had begun to test missiles and ask for the first park closures, a practice that continues today. The Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range (Alamogordo Army Air Base)

closed at the end of World War II and re-opened in 1958 as Holloman Air Force Base. The White Sands Proving Ground was established in 1945 and was later renamed White Sands Missile Range. Both military areas still operate around the park boundaries and in the cooperative use area in the western part of the park. This cooperation mutually benefits both the military by providing them additional space and the park by insuring the lack of development on the surrounding lands.

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## White Sands Today

Throughout the monument's history the National Park Service has improved visitor access to the dunefield, and continues to strive for this today. The historic visitor center is still in use; however, the museum has been updated numerous times. The most recent renovation took place in the spring of 2011 and focused on creating an exhibit that visitors of all ages can enjoy. From

the first scheduled event, "Play Day" in 1935, the National Park Service has continued to offer programs and events that interest all ages. While these first events focused mainly on recreation in the dunes, programs today offer both recreation and information about the park. Topics range from the Tularosa Basin's human history to desert survival and just about everything in between!

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## White Sands Timeline

1898	Town of Alamogordo established
1900	First article on White Sands published in <i>Journal of Geology</i>
1912	New Mexico becomes a state
1928	Highway 70 from Las Cruces to Alamogordo completed
1932	Prehistoric tracks first discovered in the monument
1933	President Herbert Hoover declares White Sands a national monument; first park custodian, Tom Charles, is hired ; Civil Works Administration (predecessor to the Works Progress Association) begins construction of Dunes Drive
1934	Opening Day Ceremony held in April
1935	First asphalt road into the dunes was completed
1935	First annual spring "Play Day" held
1936	Works Progress Administration (WPA) begins construction of Visitor Center
1938	Visitor Center and museum opened
1942	President Roosevelt signs order establishing large military land presence around the monument
1945	First atomic bomb tested at Trinity Site, 60 miles north of the monument
1950s	Nature and hiking trails constructed
1950	First major motion picture filmed at White Sands
1956	First Lake Lucero tour given by "auto caravan" with 160 participants
1969	93 African Oryx released on the missile range surrounding the monument
1993	First music video and first documentary filmed at White Sands

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To learn more about White Sands National Monument, visit <http://www.nps.gov/whsa>

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