



The Roads of White Sands



Did you know that humans have been traveling to White Sands National Monument for over 8,000 years? Have you ever wondered who traveled through the Tularosa Basin in the past, where they were going, and what they were doing? We have as well!

In 2013 and 2014, archaeologists from New Mexico State University and the National Park Service were involved in a collaborative project to gain a better understanding of the roads and trails that pass through the monument. The project was conducted under a cooperative agreement facilitated by the Desert Southwest Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (DSCESU). The purpose of the project was to locate, record, and conduct condition assessments of prehistoric and historic roads, trails, and associated cultural sites and artifacts. The cultural resources encountered were also evaluated for their potential eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Over 28 miles of roads and trails were surveyed, which included an attempt to locate the Salt Trail along the monument's western boundary. The Salt Trail was established by the Spanish to connect El Paso del Norte to Salina de San Andres for the purpose of salt collection and is associated with the Magoffin Salt War of 1854. Artifacts found

within the monument, including a Mexican cannon ball and a Spanish carreta, or ox cart, suggest the trail passed through or very close to the monument. However, the exact location of the trail is still unknown.

The survey area for this project also included portions of the Tularosa to Mesilla wagon road which branched off the Camino Real and connected the Spanish colonial towns of Tularosa to Mesilla across the Tularosa Basin. This historic road was initially established to transport troops and supplies to Fort Stanton and is still visible today skirting along the southern edge of the dune field. Rumors suggest famous outlaws such as Billy the Kid may have used this route while traveling through the area. Analysis of artifacts discarded in the vicinity of the roads and trails support human use of navigational features at White Sands since prehistoric times. The evidence indicates routes were primarily utilized for migration, ranching, salt mining, and military operations. Some roads served different functions over time. For example, dirt ranch roads were

commonly repurposed by the military through widening and the addition of gravel after White Sands Missile Range was established in the early 1940s. These alterations preserve the story of changing transportation modes in the twentieth century.

Today, most of the roads and trails crisscrossing the monument are abandoned and are slowly being reclaimed by the gypsum sand. It is important that we gather as much information about these cultural resources before they disappear. Who knows what new discoveries can be made by studying them!

—Allison Harvey, Archaeologist



Dunes Drive today