

Out of Time at the La Brea Tar Pits: People and Other Animals in a Time Capsule of Ice Age Los Angeles

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Abstract

At the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, proximity to active asphalt seeps blurs the boundary between audience and exhibit and troubles the artificial border between people and other animals. While La Brea exclusively exhibits extinct animal models in the park, leading some visitors to see extinction events as existing at a safe distance, the asphalt continues to entrap contemporary creatures and functions as a change-over-time capsule. Uncomfortably close encounters with the asphalt cue visitors to situate themselves within La Brea's ecological continuum and convey the urgency of environmental issues at present. Informed by archival research and site visits, this article deploys a non-linear narrative sequence to mirror the muddling of time in the tar pits. La Brea has the potential to decentre human visitors and help them to embrace the obligations of heir and ancestor all at once.

Key words: proximity, public park, natural history, fossils, extinction



Figure 1. 'Seniors at La Brea Tar Pits', 1967. Herald Examiner Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

At the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum in Los Angeles, visitors encounter one of the most extensive collections of Ice Age flora and fauna on the planet, preserved by anaerobic asphalt seeps that have bubbled up from the Los Angeles Basin for the past 50,000 years. In the public park where active asphalt seeps continue to trap plants and animals (a place that I will refer to now, simply, as La Brea), visitors take in free displays that bring the prehistoric past into view. For a historian who studies the cultural afterlives of long extinct animals, La Brea is a generative research site for a variety of reasons. This fossil locality (and active dig site) sits in the middle of one of the largest cities in the United States, more accessible to the public than remote paleontological research locales. Moreover, La Brea's fossil record contains the remains of creatures both extinct and extant. For while the charismatic megafauna of the Pleistocene did die out at the end of the last glacial period, this extinction event was not a biotic crisis. The region's biodiversity survived. Finally, not everyone who comes to La Brea is there to encounter the Ice Age. The park offers a grassy respite from the concrete jungle of the surrounding city. People come to walk their dogs, picnic, play lawn games, and gather with friends, tolerating the smell of hydrogen sulphide that emanates from the asphalt seeps (colloquially called tar pits). La Brea is thus a unique space in which to analyse how public displays shape popular understandings of and relationships to extinction, whether historical or ongoing.



Figure 2. Placard on the fence around La Brea's Lake Pit announces *Smilodon* as an icon of social distancing. Photograph by author, 8 January 2021.

On a walk through La Brea in January 2021, I noticed that temporary interpretive materials had been installed throughout the park, Pleistocene-themed displays that delivered natural history and public health lessons all at once. 'Did you know' that the apex predator called *Smilodon fatalis* measured six-feet long, a placard on the Lake Pit fence asked its pandemic-era audience (Figure 2). 'That's a great reminder to keep your physical distance from others in the park!' The sabre-toothed cat, ever at a distance because of its extinct nature, is an ideal mascot for social distancing. Nearby, the park's short-faced bear and giant ground sloth statues were cordoned off by yellow 'caution' tape and metal barriers. If visitors ignored the barriers and approached the statues, which generations of children have used as playthings, they found signs announcing the 'playground closed' (Figure 3). Yellow tape, barriers, and signs all signalled that the statues were off limits and, at the same time, underscored the threat La Brea has posed for millennia.



Figure 3. 'Playground Closed' warns a temporary sign. The short-faced bear has greeted visitors since the 1930s. Photograph by author, 21 December 2020.

Public health measures such as these prompt visitors to be mindful of their proximity to other people. More subtly, they also invite visitors to consider their proximity to the kinds of creatures that lived and died and, in some cases, went extinct in this very place over 10,000 years ago. Such proximity is precisely what makes La Brea unique from other spaces where long extinct life is displayed (Le Menager 2012: 382). For though separated by thousands of years from the Ice Age inhabitants of Los Angeles, visitors are physically close to the place where Pleistocene creatures – woolly mammoths, mastodons, dire wolves, giant ground sloths, and more – met their sticky end. Since my first visit to La Brea in January 2016, I have been curious about how the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County¹ leverage proximity to the tar pits and the active science conducted there to offer distinctive experiences of natural history. I am particularly interested in how visitors experience proximity through public displays (that is, displays freely available in the park rather than those in the museum). To approach an answer, I have

conducted research in the museum archives, working through exhibit development records, park management plans, and incident reports to build a picture of the visitor experiences that museum officials intended to generate, as well as those that occurred in practice. I have complemented archival research by perusing coverage of La Brea in the *Los Angeles Times*, mining online visitor reviews of the park, and bringing in autoethnographic experiences.

At La Brea, proximity to the ever-accumulating asphalt generates affective encounters and blurs the boundary between audience and exhibit – sometimes by design and sometimes by accident – and further troubles the artificial border between people and other animals (Ritvo 1995). While La Brea exclusively exhibits extinct animal models in the park, leading some visitors to see extinction events as existing at a safe distance, the tar pits continue to entrap contemporary creatures. It is these uncomfortably close encounters with the asphalt – whether physically painful or emotionally distressing – that cue visitors to situate themselves within La Brea's ecological continuum and convey the urgency of environmental issues at present. The asphalt takes visitors out of time and reorients those who attend it to understand that they are heirs and ancestors all at once, with obligations to the past, present, and future people and other animals that move through La Brea.

Tar Pit as Time Capsule

The sensory experience of La Brea's eponymous seeps – smelly, sticky, unsightly things – belies their significance. These pools of viscous hydrocarbons, some shallow and some

made deep through palaeontological excavation, are unrivalled archives that allow access to the planetary past. More than just windows onto a lost world, the 'death traps' of La Brea are change-over-time capsules. They have anaerobically preserved for posterity the remains of charismatic megafauna, now extinct, as well as smaller creatures, insects, plants, and bacteria. The tar pits are not time capsules in the narrow sense of an 'intentional deposit', nor do they offer 'deliberate testimony' to a predefined future audience (Yablon 2019: 4, 8). Unlike traditional, curated time capsules, La Brea's fossil record is not terribly discriminating; still, it is selective. During the Pleistocene, the seeps functioned as a 'carnivore trap'. Whenever a bison or camel or some other large animal found itself entrapped, carnivores saw an easy meal. As sabre-tooth and dire wolf and American lion approached to claim the feast, they became trapped too. And so, carnivores are overrepresented in La Brea's fossil record. Conversely, nocturnal animals that roamed La Brea during the cooler evening hours when the tar was less viscous are underrepresented.² La Brea has chronicled the region's changing environment for tens of thousands of years and still collects this data today.

La Brea's exhibits are part of the time capsule too. If you look closely, you can see the park's exhibitionary strata: the cement statues of extinct animals crafted in the 1930s, worse for nearly a century of wear; the fences added in the 1940s to prevent people and (some) other animals from falling into the pits; fiberglass mammoths that entered the park in the 1960s; and a dedicated tar pits museum – housed in a lawn-covered building intentionally evoking a burial mound – that opened in 1977 (Smith 1977; McNassor 2011). La Brea is thus a change-over-time capsule that speaks from shallow and deep historical pasts at once. Like the original 'time vessels', which emerged as a cultural trend in the United States during the 1870s according to cultural historian Nick Yablon (2019: 10, 18-9), the tar pits create an 'affective bond' across the ages.

Visitors to La Brea receive what Steffi de Jong (2018), borrowing from Gustave Flaubert, has called a 'sentimental education', a phrase that captures how museums deploy immersive display tactics like soundscapes or cycloramas to instruct and engage visitors simultaneously through their senses and their emotions. In the park, people learn about the more-than-human history of the Los Angeles Basin through informational placards, sensational statues, and ongoing excavations. With the exception of accidental human entrapments in the tar pits (which I will address), the exhibits at La Brea are not literally immersive. The high-rise buildings of the Miracle Mile shopping district and the sounds of the city cannot be shut out entirely. Still, these displays do generate sentimental experiences that engage visitors' emotions and their senses. The still-seeping asphalt is the critical ingredient here, a sensory experience that sticks to visitors' shoes, stains their clothes, and on especially warm days fills the air with an unpleasant odour. The tar pits are a literal link between past and present, an interspecies and intergenerational graveyard, laden with life, loss, and history, that inspires diverse emotional responses.

Consider the visitor who described her 2016 experience as 'sadly fascinating'. La Brea was 'heart-breakingly sad', she told readers on the tourist forum website *TripAdvisor*, 'when you stop to consider how many animals lost their lives under your feet (or is that just me? I do tend to be a bleeding heart...)'. She elaborated:

The biggest exhibit – the one that most people are at least vaguely aware of, even if they've never visited the site – is the outdoor one. The one that depicts the mama mammoth stuck in tar, trumpeting in fear as the papa and baby stand on the shore, beside themselves with fear and unable to help in any way. It's a depressing scene... and, as it turns out, completely incorrect. The plaque at the head of the exhibit breaks down what you're seeing, and all the inaccuracies they've uncovered over the years. Still, even if it is wrong, it's still incredibly sad. Yes, I KNOW they aren't real, and I KNOW they perished long, long ago, but to see that scene played out in front of you – while the pit bubbles and the mama mammoth sways in the tar – it just makes me want to cry.³

Despite the unpleasant emotions elicited by the sad scene in the Lake Pit (which we will revisit), this visitor planned to return and encouraged readers to see La Brea for themselves. Attention to powerfully affected encounters like this one (admittedly more effusive than most reviews) responds to Dolly Jørgensen's (2019) call for historians of extinction to attend to emotion and

augments scholarship within the environmental humanities that considers affective responses to extinction events and how these responses mobilize people toward being in thoughtful relation to their environments (Lorimer 2015; Heise 2016; Jørgensen 2019).

Apprehending museum visitor experiences through *TripAdvisor* reviews is not a novel research method. Scholars have deployed qualitative interpretations of small datasets and computer modelling of large ones to analyse trends that emerge across visitor populations (Ferguson *et al.* 2015; Carter 2016; Souto 2018; Ramírez-Gutiérrez *et al.* 2018; Alexander *et al.* 2018). Here, *TripAdvisor* reviews allow access to the affective nature of visitors' encounters (Vásquez 2012) and contribute to scholarship that attends to affective museum-going experiences (Waterton and Dittmer 2014; Smith *et al.* 2018). While this literature has typically focused on difficult human histories like slavery or war, online evaluations of La Brea demonstrate how diverse publics process difficult more-than-human histories. A perusal of *TripAdvisor* testimonies (over 3,000 in total) suggests that visitors experience a variety of positive and negative affects at La Brea, but it is difficult to identify through these evaluations if the tar pits generated an 'affective bond with posterity' that, like nineteenth-century time vessels, 'promoted a sense of duty' between corresponding times (Yablon 2019: 116). Can La Brea's proximity to deep and shallow pasts inspire dutiful more-than-human relations?

Taking inspiration from the storytelling mode adopted by the Extinction Studies Working Group, which allows us to 'inhabit *multiply*-storied worlds', stories introduce and advance each subsequent section of this essay (Rose *et al.* 2017: 3). These episodes aim to express diverse (albeit inexhaustive) experiences of La Brea and focalize through some of the people and other animals that have moved through – and in some cases permanently remained in – La Brea. Further inspired by the muddling of linear time at the tar pits, these stories proceed



Figure 4. 'Recent Victim of the Tar Pits', no date. Security Pacific National Bank Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

without care for precise sequencing, moving back and forth through (Western, linear, human) time. As geoscientist Marcia Bjornerud (2018: 7) argues, humans tend to be 'intemperate' or 'time illiterate'. We struggle to think deeply, in a geological sense, about the far future or distant past, which impedes individual and collective action with respect to the climate crisis. Though, as anthropologist Vincent Ialenti (2020) suggests, intellectual exercises (which he calls 'reckonings') can train the 'intemperate' to contend with temporal scales incommensurate with their experiences on this earth. La Brea might help with such reckoning, for the tar pits are change-over-time capsules that invite visitors to experience a more-than-human past, present, and – because they continue their chronicle even now – an anticipated future.

A More-Than-Human History of La Brea

*The jackrabbit hops along in search of a meal but takes a fatal leap. Something sticky holds it fast and though its long hind legs are strong, it cannot escape. Exhausted from the effort, without protection from the elements, the animal expires. In the scientific literature, it is known as *Lepus californicus*, though the hare hasn't a care for what people call it – or what they will call it when scientific binomials are invented. Neither animal nor asphalt reckons with human time. While this jackrabbit's life is cut short, its species is enduring and prolific, of 'least concern' for conservationists. Its kind have lived, died, and been fossilized at La Brea for many thousands of years.⁴*

Across millennia, La Brea has witnessed people relating to its tar in many ways: the first peoples of what is now called California using the asphalt to make their vessels watertight; white settlers extracting it to pave roads; the Hancock family drilling beneath the surface seeps to get rich off the oil reserves below; scientists chipping away at the dried asphalt matrix to reveal the fossils within (McNassor 2011). While we will soon abandon linear time, two temporal constants ought to ground us in the shallow, settler-colonial history of this space: 1924 and 1977. In 1924, George Allan Hancock, who owned the fossil- and fossil fuel-rich land of Rancho La Brea, donated a portion of his property to Los Angeles County. Hancock required the county to commit itself to continued scientific study of the invaluable asphalt seeps. What was then called the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science, and Art (located about 10 kilometres away in Exposition Park) was to dig and display in perpetuity. But he also stipulated that the land 'shall forever be maintained and kept open to the public as a public park, and that no charge or fee shall be made or collected for admission thereto'.⁵ The county has been juggling these two mandates ever since, working to interpret La Brea as a significant scientific site while also providing public recreation in the very same space. Even before the deed transfer was notarized, county and museum officials were planning to install a dedicated Tar Pits museum at La Brea to display fossils on site, but funding always fell short. There was occasionally enough money to develop open-air exhibits in the public park, the locus of this story. It took over half a century to realize intentions for a museum. In 1977, real estate developer and philanthropist George C. Page donated millions to a project for which county officials could not find the money. That museum has changed little since it opened, though very soon it will be overhauled entirely (Dreyfuss 1977; Pineda 2019).

La Brea has the potential to offer visitors a new temporal perspective wherein past and present are not distinct but proximate, imbricated, in relation. If we take our cues from the tar itself, linear time fades away and the years start to stick together. Creatures that never could have met in life share space in the multispecies matrix of a tar pit, for the methane that still causes the asphalt to ooze and bubble has 'churn[ed] the bones from different animals and time periods into complex jumbles'. The communal grave known as Pit 61/67 (signifying that these were the 61st and 67th of 96 exploratory excavations dug during the 1910s) contained the bones of dire wolves that lived 13,000 years ago, as well as those of a domesticated dog that barked 6,000 years later. What's more, as informational placards throughout the park explain, physical proximity does not correlate to temporal proximity. Excavators unearthed a juniper tree in Pit 3 that last bloomed 17,000 years ago. Digging just feet away in Pit 4, they found

the bones of sabre-tooths twice as old.⁶ Nor is everything represented in the pits lost to us. The juniper, for instance, thrives throughout California. In fact, all of the plant species found in the fossil record at La Brea are extant. So too are many of the animals, like the jackrabbit. This is critical: La Brea's 'death traps' are themselves not implicated in extinction. They have merely contributed to the deaths of individual animals that now happen to be extinct. While many of the creatures that inhabited the Los Angeles Basin during the Late Pleistocene are extant, the most prominent public displays feature only the charismatic megafauna of a lost world. As the following sections demonstrate, prioritizing the display of extinct animals elides extant life – including the fact that humans are part of La Brea's deep history – and contributes to misconceptions about the planetary past.

Close Encounters of the Extinct Kind

May 1936. By the time La Brea's caretaker arrives at Pit 4, drawn by desperate cries for help, R.B. Spowers is mired up to his neck. He'd been feeling unwell and only intended to sit for a spell on the retaining wall that separates park from pit. Overcome by dizziness, he fell in instead. Spowers had tried in vain to free himself from the viscous 'asphalt maw' and its 'vise-like grip'. Like so many creatures before him, he had exhausted himself with the effort. The caretaker throws him a rope. Nearby, cement statues of extinct and entrapped animals – American lions, bison, ground sloths, and more – watch with inanimate envy as Spowers is saved from the fate of those they represent (Anonymous 1936).

Since taking over La Brea in 1924, the County Museum had replaced the oil derricks and asphalt excavations that once occupied the site with plants more pleasing to the senses (Crane 1926; Bartlett 1927). While there was not yet funding for an on-site museum, there was money enough for landscaping, stone walls to keep visitors from slipping into the pits, and some statuary. In 1934, extinct animals made their return to La Brea when sculptor Hermann T. Beck began installing a cement menagerie. He crafted three sabre-tooths fighting over the flesh of an entrapped bison, a pair of American lions on the prowl, a short-faced bear lolling on a boulder (Figure 3), and two ground sloths, posed as if wary of predators (Scott 1985: 24). Beck's stony brutes represented some of the animals that used to wander the region, extinct for over 10,000 years, and invited park visitors to be 'virtual witnesses' to Ice Age Los Angeles (Rudwick 1992; Cain 2010). Most of these statues are still on display in the park, iconic representations of the deep past and relics of more shallow human history. Beck's statues took advantage of shared space to bridge a temporal divide. And yet, they misled visitors in some critical ways. The statues represented extinct animals exclusively. They thus failed to convey the diversity of creatures preserved in the tar pits' fossil record, the fact that many of those species were extant, or the reality that people were part of that continuum. Rather than show continuity between Ice Age and contemporary Los Angeles, the statues gestured toward a lost world to which visitors had privileged access.

The Depression-Era statues communicated an incomplete picture of change over time at La Brea. Museum officials were sensitive to this and endeavoured to offer a more holistic reconstruction of the Ice Age environment. A development plan drawn up in 1940, designed and adopted by the museum's board of governors but halted, ultimately, due to war and budgetary concerns, shows intentions to fill the park with animals extinct and extant. There would be deer and antelope that park visitors could see still alive today in addition to horses (which went extinct in North America before being reintroduced by European colonizers), peccaries, tapirs, and a dozen other kinds of creatures scattered about. The plan was imprecise, however, using informal rather than scientific names. Did the 'lion' group refer to extant mountain lions (*Puma concolor*) or extinct American lions (*Panthera atrox*)? Did the general reference to 'birds' include kinds that survived the Pleistocene?⁷ Such details are absent from the archive, though the existing statues suggest that extinct kinds would take priority.

Over the decades, museum officials continued to work toward a more complete reconstruction of La Brea. A 1967 development plan envisioned installing habitat groups throughout the park that altogether would function as 'a facsimile of a Pleistocene atmosphere'.

While far from a true facsimile of Ice Age La Brea, this plan (like that of 1940) intended to include extant animals, like coyotes, among the extinct ones.⁸ This 'Pleistocene Zoo' would feature models crafted of fiberglass and painted in lifelike colours, a departure from the bare cement of the park's existing statues (Felton 1966). The zoo's first inhabitant, a male Imperial Mammoth, arrived in 1967, joined the following year by its mate and calf (Figure 1 and Figure 5). The female mammoth was installed in the lake, entrapped and ever trumpeting in terror (Reich 1967; Anonymous 1968). A few more animals were added to the bank around the lake pit in 1968 – a mastodon, a small pride of sabre-tooth cats that leered hungrily at the mammoths, and a bird of prey called *Teratornis*, perched in a tree. The project froze there as vandalism and theft generated fear of further investment (Scott 1985: 26-7).

Excluding the Extant

June 1968. Virginia M. Humphreys is discomfited by the macabre mammoth group and airs her grievance in the Los Angeles Times. 'I spent a lot of time in this park as a child, and I recall the mere thought of anything drowning in the tar upset me. Now children can see, in living color, what this pitiful scene must have been like. I believe it should be removed, or at least modified' (Humphreys 1968).



The captive mammoth captivates. It elicits what Stephanie LeMenager (2012: 380) has called 'visceral mimicry' in its obvious distress. Seeing the tragic scene is, undeniably, an affective experience, but it is not altogether a welcome one as the critique from Humphreys illustrates. The museum did not address her concerns, for the project was expensive and the affect deliberate. In the decades since she (and others) complained, the lake pit scene has circulated widely in popular culture and endeared itself to locals. Now that generations of Los Angeles residents have grown up with this mammoth group in their shared backyard, the statues evoke nostalgia in addition to sympathy. Ahead of the museum's upcoming renovations, visitors have passionately made the case for the fiberglass mammoths to remain in the Lake Pit, despite the scientific inaccuracies that some scientists would have revised (Pineda 2019).

Figure 5. Mammoth Family in the Lake Pit. Photograph by author, 21 December 2020.

La Brea's scientists have long been frustrated with the park's public displays and, like their colleagues at other natural history museums, complained to museum leadership about the implications of artistic license (Cain 2010: 292-3). They also worried about the scientific inaccuracies that casual visitors to the park would take away. For in addition to the lack of extant animals on display, the existing exhibits were too sensational for their liking. The dramatic multi-animal entrapments suggested by the park's statues were rare, occurring as infrequently as once in a decade. Moreover, as the museum itself announced in exhibit guides, the 'pits' were anachronisms created by human excavation. In internal memos dating to the 1970s, palaeontologist William Akersten recommended filling in the Lake Pit (a man-made remnant of the Hancock family's nineteenth-century asphalt mining ventures) until only a small pool remained. Akersten was willing to let the iconic mammoth remain there, in an atypical entrapment scenario fit for Hollywood, if the museum would produce complementary groups that depicted more likely scenes throughout the park, like a camel carcass that had attracted birds of prey and a juvenile bison mired in a shallow seep while fleeing an American lion. 'Of course', Akersten added, 'the labels should explain that entrapment was a relatively rare phenomenon and that the number of animal reconstructions shown is probably an exaggeration of their true density'.⁹ His recommendations were not adopted, likely for budgetary reasons, though a placard on the Lake Pit does inform visitors who care to read it about the installation's scientific inaccuracies. Now over fifty years old, the mammoths have become iconic and historic relics in their own right.

Excluding extant animals from public displays at La Brea has led visitors to understand Ice Age Los Angeles as entirely distinct from the present. There are no dinosaurs at La Brea. Southern California was underwater until quite recently, in deep time terms, and dinosaurs were long extinct by the time asphalt began trapping animals there around 50,000 years ago. Still, many visitors arrive expecting to see dinosaurs. And many leave thinking that they have. *TripAdvisor* testimonies offer some insight into the ways in which people understand (or are confounded by) the planetary past. 'Worth a visit. I mean dinosaurs in the middle of LA... It's a great place to get educated on dinos', wrote a visitor in April 2017. Others echoed this sentiment: 'How amazing to walk around a museum and park full of dinosaur bones, mammoths, and mystery', wrote a woman who visited with her teenage sons. 'Hard to imagine a site like this in the center of a big city... where dinosaurs went to die and where the tar continues to bubble up. Archaeological exhibits well worth seeing'. The reviews speak to how distinct practices like archaeology and palaeontology are collapsed and how the extinct animals of deep time get jumbled up in popular conceptions. Even visitors who understand Mesozoic monsters and Pleistocene mammals to be distinct participate in this conflation. 'Not a T-rex or Triceratops to be found...' noted a tourist in his favourable five-star review. 'This is a museum full of more recent dinosaurs', which he specified to mean mastodons, sabre-tooths, giant sloths, and the like.¹⁰

Such a capacious definition of 'dinosaur' points to a popular misconception that has persisted since the deep time revolution of the nineteenth century. Martin Rudwick (1992: 244) has demonstrated how audiences that viewed early representations of the prehistoric past, which he terms 'scenes from deep time', tended to regard that past 'as a single undifferentiated world' separate from our own. Even visitors who enjoyed their visit to La Brea, engaged with interpretive materials, and took a guided tour, might depart with the same (enthusiastically) erroneous ideas they brought with them. Museums and other proponents of popular education have long held that the public requires models and supplementary text to make sense of the palaeontological past (Secord 2004: 158-9; Rieppel 2019: 205). The misunderstandings that bubble up in reviews of La Brea make clear that even carefully curated encounters cannot dismantle popular misconceptions or curb eager imaginations entirely. La Brea's exclusive display of extinct megafauna plays into this established phenomenon and allows visitors to see the past and present as separate spheres rather than in relation. Including extant animal models might encourage visitors to see La Brea not as a 'scene from deep time' but instead as a change-over-time capsule to which these visitors contribute.

Too Close for Comfort

July 1958. A pair of mockingbirds flits through the park. Perhaps these omnivores are attracted to the junipers or elderberries there, 'native' species found in the fossil record and replanted to approximate the Pleistocene environment. Maybe they are drawn to the scent of the 'exotic' eucalyptus trees, much more recently imported botanical additions to the region. Or perhaps they are in search of water. Whatever it is that brings them to La Brea is their doom. For when the songbirds swoop down to land in a welcoming pool of water, they find themselves mired like so many creatures before them. The oasis disguises the covetous asphalt below.¹¹

Ethel Hendrickson noticed the mockingbirds 'entrapped and gaping without a sound'. She alerted the guard on duty, but he told her not to be alarmed. It was a 'daily' occurrence. Unsatisfied with the guard's explanation, she bypassed museum leadership and wrote directly to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

Many persons in my church, as well as others, very strongly feel that this hazard should be given immediate attention and corrected. We appreciate that Los Angeles is a large, wonderful city... and we further appreciate that we are civilized, and as such, the proper care of wild life, particularly in our public parks, [is] our responsibility.

She demanded that the county remediate this 'hazard' by installing dedicated water fonts throughout the park and adding nets over the pits to prevent further entrapments like this. In articulating a duty of care and advocating for the nonhuman animals that used La Brea, Hendrickson was thinking in terms of 'multispecies justice' (Heise 2016: 236). Though the Supervisors were sympathetic to this request and instructed the museum to 'give thought' to such a 'constructive comment', the pits remained uncapped.¹²

Hendrickson was not alone in her advocacy. Other visitors who witnessed entrapments wrote to the museum, echoing her alarm and demands. Still others mounted rescue operations, like the dog walker who climbed over a fence and used a eucalyptus branch (handed to him by an unhoused resident of the park) to extricate what he believed was an endangered peregrine falcon. Despite this heroic attempt, the raptor expired. When museum staff cleaned the bird, they were relieved to find that it was not an endangered animal at all but a common Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), a species with fossilized ancestors in the tar pits (Pool 1997). Domesticated and domestic animals, too, have lost their lives in the tar pits. For La Brea's human visitors bring their companion species with them to the park. Before the tall fences were installed in the 1940s, the entrapment of off-leash dogs chasing squirrels or investigating strange scents was a not infrequent affair. Some were saved. Others, like a spaniel in 1951, 'walked with history' and joined the 'ghosts of giants' (Anonymous 1951: 2). While these entrapments have prehistoric precedents, they are not entirely natural occurrences. When Los Angeles County took over George Hancock's Rancho La Brea, museum and county officials transformed it from a sparse terrain dotted with oil derricks into a lush urban park. Pleasant landscaping invited humans and other animals into closer proximity to the pits and has further increased the likelihood of entrapments. Urban wildlife is collateral damage and proof of concept at La Brea.

Over the decades, countless creatures have been ensnared by the asphalt. Humans – like R.B. Spowers – are no exception (Anonymous 1936). Because of this danger to people and other animals, La Brea is filled with fences. These chain-link barriers, installed in 1948, prevent *accidental* human entrapment in the pits (McNassor 2011: 67). They also ensure that visitors' encounters with the bubbling asphalt are mediated. Standing near the Lake Pit and looking at the pitiful mother mammoth, visitors may take comfort in this fence that suggests they are a safe distance from her fate. And yet, neon traffic cones throughout the park give pause (Figures 5 and 6): 'LOOK OUT' and 'STICKY', the cones announce, playfully yet earnestly. La Brea's asphalt is not confined within the fenced areas. It seeps up throughout the park, in the parking lots, and even into the basements of nearby apartment complexes.

While fences keep visitors at a distance from the more dangerous seeps, humans are not kept out of the pits entirely. La Brea is an active palaeontological research site. The early-twentieth-



Figure 6. Tarred Traffic Cones. Photograph by author, 8 January 2021.

century digs prioritized the extraction of megafauna, but the excavations that have been ongoing since 1969 look to the matrix and microfossils to reconstruct the Ice Age environment. Dig volunteers became part of the display. Visitors could watch as the housewives, high school students, flight attendants, actors, musicians, retirees, and more – a marvellous ‘mix of mankind’ according to one journalist – along with a bare-bones crew of staff scientists slowly exhumed and prepared the fossils. When they dug too deep to be seen from the surface, the museum installed a closed-circuit television to provide the public continued access to the excavation (Seidenbaum 1972). For the past 50 years, museum staff and volunteers have themselves been on display alongside the asphalt. Whereas the extinct animal displays suggest a chasm between past and present, these people in the pits implicitly communicate continuity.

Inheritance Out of Time

January 1969. Seven-year-old Andrew Donnelly scrambles up the short-faced bear. Generations of children before him had marvelled at and played upon the Depression-Era menagerie. Decades of use had ‘worn smooth’ some of the animals and the elements (mild though they are in Southern California) had damaged others, now cracked open to reveal the rusting metal ‘spines’ that reinforced them. But Donnelly is not deterred. La Brea is his playground. He launches himself down the statue like it is a slide and, during the brief journey, ‘cut[s] his buttock on a protruding nail’.¹³

Donnelly’s bloody meeting was, quite literally, an uncomfortably close encounter, but I want to use this incident to point toward the way in which various publics claim La Brea. By the 1960s, the Depression-Era statues had shifted from scientific models to jungle gym, a point of contention for residents of the well-to-do neighbourhood surrounding the park. Not long after Donnelly’s accident, a Mrs H.N. Callanan wrote to the *Times* to protest the annoyance caused by children who played there.

Our park is being ubiquitously abused, deteriorated and used as a picnic grounds for school children from all parts of Los Angeles ... The pre-historic Ice Age mammals... are being destroyed by dozens of boys and girls climbing on them marring the beauty that others have enjoyed.

She wanted La Brea reserved for residents who paid taxes in that neighbourhood (Callanan 1969). Readers of the *Times* were not sympathetic. Even the director of the natural history museum weighed in, explaining that the educational utility of the Depression-Era statues was 'now considered limited'. With the fiberglass 'Pleistocene Zoo' already partially installed, the museum wanted these rather obsolete statues to be 'more accessible to the younger members of the public' (Friedmann 1969).

Callanan's critique, and the public backlash it inspired, underscores a sentiment that has characterized debates about how best to use this public park, for some people insist that they have more right to this place than others. Taken together with nostalgic recollections about the mammoth family and emotive *TripAdvisor* reviews, this debate makes plain the powerfully affected relationships people have to this place. While some people claim La Brea as their own based on their tax contributions or their personal histories in this place, legally it belongs to Los Angeles County.¹⁴ And since 1964, La Brea has been registered as a National Natural Landmark, a program operated by the United States Department of the Interior to 'foster a greater concern for the conservation of the nation's natural heritage'.¹⁵ Through this program, a nation not yet two centuries old bureaucratically claimed 50,000 years of more-than-human history as its heritage. Such legal and rhetorical manoeuvres, which annex planetary past after the fact, are used to validate colonial and settler-colonial regimes (Douglas 2010; Chakrabarti 2020; Wilson 2020).



Figure 7: 'Tread Lightly'. Photograph by author, 21 December 2020.

While La Brea is configured as human and natural heritage, close encounters at La Brea inspire another way of relating. 'La Brea's death traps continue recording L.A.'s changing environment – even today', signs throughout the park explain, while others entreat visitors not to throw trash into the pits. The asphalt began its chronicle long before us and will continue it long after we are gone. Some see La Brea as a heritage site, but it is La Brea that inherits us, all too literally. 'Tread lightly' warns a placard on Pit 13 (Figure 7). The text explains that asphalt seeps continue to trap plants and animals. They 'could take you down too, if you're not careful'. Addressing readers directly, the text forces 'you' to consider your place in relation to La Brea's deep history and unfinished story. Similar interpretive techniques have been embraced by extinct animal statue parks across North America and Europe, where displays ask visitors to consider themselves alongside creatures that are now extinct. As Ross J. Wilson has noted, these interpretive materials communicate the 'contingent and precarious position of our own species' (Wilson 2020: 130).

La Brea cultivates affective encounters with tar-trapped creatures extinct and extant and nudges visitors to consider themselves alongside those animals. As extinction studies scholars have shown, a narrative mode that privileges individual animals' stories is critical in encouraging careful relations between humans and the more-than-human world. Extinction is 'a collective death,' but one 'pieced together out of the deaths of countless individual organisms' (Rose *et al.* 2017: 8). The affective experience of physical proximity, the sympathy elicited by individual animals in distress, and the realization that we might be those animals, altogether impart unsettling but impactful lessons about humanity's place in and out of time. Can affective encounters with change-over-time capsules inspire visitors to be in good relation with the more-than-human world? Scholars have shown that affective experiences do have implications for environmental education, advocacy, and behavioural change toward more sustainable ways of being (Bruni *et al.* 2018; Bryan 2020). La Brea's ever-accumulating, multispecies matrix, ancestor and descendent all at once, might inspire new kinds of relations at a moment of environmental crisis exacerbated by linear, extractive logics. However, it does not do so inherently. As a historical site of resource extraction, in a city built around car culture, the park's shallow historical past weighs it down.

Despite what the misnomer 'tar pits' leads many visitors to believe, animals entrapped in La Brea's asphalt seeps did not sink. Rather they were incorporated ever so slowly into a physical archive and preserved for all time out of time. This productively polysemous phrase – out of time – directs us toward a conclusion, if not an ending. The creatures caught in La Brea's 'death traps' live no longer. They have run out of time. The extinct animals encountered there, as fossils or statues, have endured a 'double death' (Rose 2012: 128). They have run out of time and, being extinct, function as anachronistic interlopers once resurrected (i.e. represented) in the world today. They are out of time twice over. The iconic representations of extinct animals installed in the 1930s and 1960s are outdated, fossilized versions of an earlier era's scientific and artistic collaborations. The muddled fossil matrices invite visitors to consider other kinds of temporal accumulation beyond linear chronicles calibrated to human lives. The domesticated dog and dire wolves preserved in Pit 61/67 were not contemporaries in life but are forever out of time together as fossils. The warnings to 'tread lightly' prompt us to consider ourselves and our world as precarious, nearly if not entirely out of time. The concept of a countdown clock, of course, is scaled to human time and contemporary concerns. In deep time, everything is out of time.

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Notes

- ¹ A note on terminology: at present the La Brea Tar Pits Museum is one of three institutions under the auspices of the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County. This article largely focuses on activities at La Brea before the Tar Pits Museum opened in 1977, when the site was run by the then singular County Museum, housed eight miles away in Exposition Park.
- ² 'Mammal Collections', *La Brea Tar Pits and Museum*. <https://tarpits.org/research-collections/tar-pits-collections/mammal-collections>, accessed 28 December 2020.
- ³ 'Sadly fascinating!', *TripAdvisor* 3 September 2016. https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g32655-d143830-r414279977-La_Brea_Tar_Pits_and_Museum-Los_Angeles_California.html, accessed 12 March 2021.
- ⁴ The jackrabbit photograph (Figure 4) was included in a museum exhibit guide that explained how La Brea entrapped and preserved animals (Department of Natural Sciences 1915: 10-2).
- ⁵ Hancock Park Deed, 19 May 1924. Folder: Fred Gehring Hancock Park, planting 1949, 1950. Box: Fred Gehring Hancock Park 1949-1957. Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County (NHMLA) Archives.
- ⁶ See 'Tar Seeps Form Ice Age Time Capsules' (no date) [placard on fence surrounding Pits 3, 4, 61/67]. La Brea Tar Pits and Museum, Los Angeles.
- ⁷ Development Plan Hancock Park, May 1940, George C. Page Museum Library at the Tar Pits Museum Flat File Drawer. NHMLA Archives.
- ⁸ See, for instance, Development Plan, February 1967, Prepared by the Architectural Division of the County Engineer, George C. Page Museum Library at the Tar Pits Museum Flat File Drawer. NHMLA Archives.
- ⁹ William Akersten Memo, 8 May 1975. Folder: Hancock Park Development 1970s. Box: Hancock Park. NHMLA Archives.
- ¹⁰ Over 200 TripAdvisor reviews (approximately 7 per cent) mention dinosaurs. Many of these reviews caution others not to expect a Jurassic Park experience or note that La Brea would be interesting for kids who are in a 'dinosaur phase'. A significant number, however, comment on how educational, interesting, or unsettling it was to see all the dinosaurs displayed there. See various reviews including 'Spooky!', 'Prehistoric LA', 'Oh my Jurassic Park!', and 'Not a T-rex or Triceratops to be found...', TripAdvisor https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g32655-d143830-r340809268-La_Brea_Tar_Pits_and_Museum-Los_Angeles_California.html, accessed 12 March 2021.
- ¹¹ Ralph Chaney Report, 6 March 1940. Folder: Ralph Chaney – 1940 Planting at Hancock Park. Hancock Park File Cabinet. NHMLA Archives.
- ¹² Ethel M. Hendrickson to Board of Supervisors, 3 July 1958. Folder: Bird in Pit. Hancock Park File Cabinet. NHMLA Archives. No mockingbirds are represented in the fossil record, but the pits have yielded two extant relatives from family *Mimidae*: *Oreoscoptes montanus* and *Toxostoma redivivum*. See 'Bird Collections', *La Brea Tar Pits and Museum*. <https://tarpits.org/research-collections/tar-pits-collections/bird-collections>, accessed 28 December 2020.
- ¹³ Los Angeles County Non-Employee Accident or Illness Report, 3 January 1969. Folder: Hancock Park/Zanoni Incidents – Vandalism 1960s Box: Hancock Park, Zanoni/Bergeron. George C. Page Museum Library. NHMLA Archives.

- ¹⁴ Hancock Park Deed, 1924. NHMLA Archives.
- ¹⁵ 'National Natural Landmarks: Frequently Asked Questions', National Park Service. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nlandmarks/faq.htm>, accessed 14 February 2021. For a critical perspective on how natural resources from deep time are elsewhere transformed into inheritance and subsequently weaponized against Indigenous communities, consult the work of Métis scholar Zoe Todd. See Zoe Todd, 'Weaponized Fossil Kin and the Alberta Economy', *Speculative Fish-ctions*, 19 January 2021. <https://zoestodd.com/2021/01/19/weaponized-fossil-kin-and-the-alberta-economy/>, accessed 30 December 2021.

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