

Ripples in the white sands



WHITE SANDS NATIONAL PARK

NEW MEXICO • 2019 • BELIEF

*[W]here there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues,
they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.
For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes,
what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man,
I put the ways of childhood behind me.*

—1 CORINTHIANS 13: 8–11

You may know gypsum better in one of its different forms. It's used to create drywall and toothpaste. When it's dry, it's the base for plaster of Paris. But this seemingly mundane chemical becomes an astounding work of natural art in the New Mexico desert at White Sands National Park.

Surrounded by desert, White Sands' dunes are the result of a sea that drowned the area a quarter of a billion years ago. Gypsum is among the minerals deposited by that seawater. Tectonic plates broke up and shifted, creating the Rocky Mountains seventy million years ago, and smaller fractures thirty million years ago created the San Andres and Sacramento Mountains that hem in the sand dunes.

A cooler, wetter environment emerged about 24,000 years ago, dissolving the accumulated gypsum and pooling it in a lake that largely dried up about ten thousand years ago. Like another familiar mineral, salt, drying gypsum forms crystals of selenite, usually a few centimeters long but occasionally more than two feet long. Those brittle crystals can't resist the persistent winds from the southwest. Tiny pieces of the crystals chip off and are polished to a bright white as they roll across the desert floor, accumulating once again, this time in dunes of trillions of trillions of crystals.

Today's desert setting creates all kinds of illusions. You may perceive White Sands as a very dry place, but water is all around you. With just a little digging, you'll find moist sand that helps stabilize the dunes in the persistent wind. At the base of the dunes, ground water is only a few feet below.

The dunes can also look barren, but look carefully for the monument's unique residents. Remember those elementary school science lessons about animals adapting to their environment? White Sands is a living laboratory of biological adaption, home to bleached earless lizards, Apache pocket mice, sand-treader camel crickets, sand wolf spiders, and white moths. The plants on the dunes have roots that tap the hidden reservoir of ground water. Sometimes, when a dune has blown away, pedestals of Hoary Rosemary Mint or Skunkbush Sumac stand their ground, marking where the dune's surface had been. Rio Grande cottonwoods create far-reaching root systems that create the appearance of multiple trees when there is actually only one tree.

From a distance, the dunes look like snow, and they are great for winter-like activities regardless of the temperature. Sledding is a popular pastime at the dunes, though it requires different equipment and techniques. Look for photographers pretending they're shivering in the cold when in fact they're soaking up the dry heat.

When you're in the desert, what do you see? Are you a realist, seeing barren piles of white sands stretching for miles? Are you imaginative, seeing snowdrifts?



A pedestal, showing where the sand's surface was not too long ago.



Camel crickets are adapted to live in White Sands' gypsum.



A Bleached Earless Lizard, adapted to the lighter shades

Are you a historian, seeing an ocean reaching over your head teeming with strange lifeforms now extinct? Or do you create your own understanding of this puzzling place?

The human imagination continues to baffle us—how it exists at all, what it is capable of achieving, how it can believe that the impossible is indeed possible. Surely there is more to the human consciousness than a complex chemical reaction! Whatever that mystery ingredient is, it empowers humans to perceive the universe and

believe the mysteries of faith. The core of our faith is what we believe to be the truest truths our perceptions have encountered. But when it comes to our faith, why, exactly, do we believe what we believe? We may have learned our basic beliefs at a very young age; we've always thought this way, more or less. We may have broken with old beliefs and taken on new ones, perhaps similar or perhaps radically different. Or maybe you have taken a route all your own.

How did you arrive at this point in your faith journey? What is something you used to believe that you no longer believe? What are your most deeply-held beliefs?