

Per Sward photo

# River of Relics

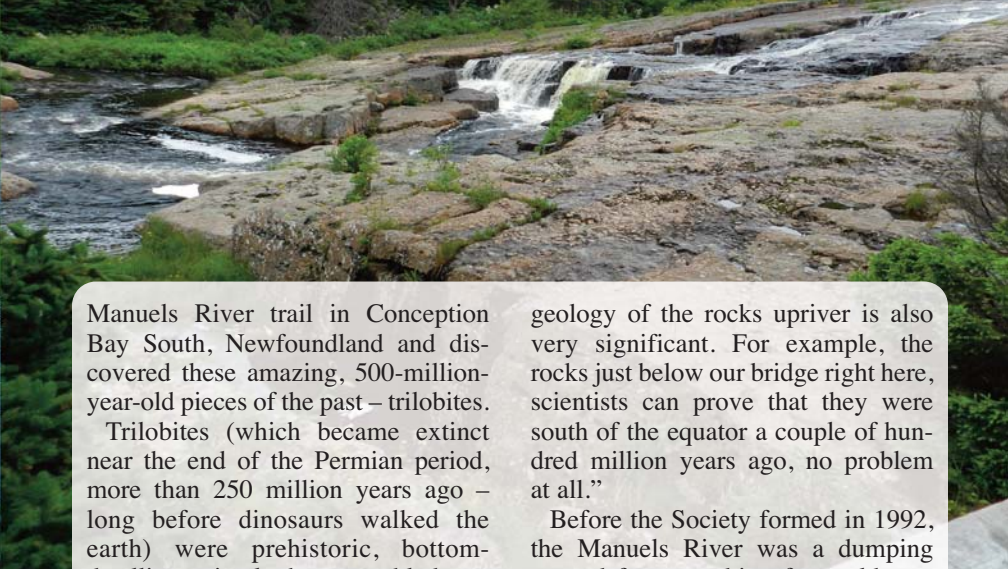
A new interpretation centre will help tell the ancient story of a world-renowned fossil site in Manuels, Newfoundland.

By Linda Browne

## Their alien-like imprints are stamped

into the ancient rock like a mysterious code begging to be deciphered. Over 100 sit conspicuously in a glass display case in the corner of the room, like revered relics; the little pieces of paper sitting atop them read like epitaphs: “Andrea Mullan; Toronto, ON; Aug. 10, 2008.” “Daniel Reid Blackmore; Age 6; July 12, 2011.” They are the people who have wandered along the





Manuels River trail in Conception Bay South, Newfoundland and discovered these amazing, 500-million-year-old pieces of the past – trilobites.

Trilobites (which became extinct near the end of the Permian period, more than 250 million years ago – long before dinosaurs walked the earth) were prehistoric, bottom-dwelling animals that resembled carpenters or crabs and had exterior shells, similar to lobsters. They were first discovered along the Manuels River (one of the oldest river systems in North America) in 1874, and the area has been known as a world-class fossil site ever since.

“The Manuels River was formed 540 million years ago. These (animals) were swimming around in the ocean right here. The Manuels River at that time was part of a conglomerate of Morocco, Wales and this part of the Avalon Peninsula...and then they split. These fossils right here are identical to the fossils in Morocco, they’re identical to the fossils in Wales...that’s what surprises people sometimes,” says Gary Gallagher, chair of the Manuels River Natural

Heritage Society (a non-profit, volunteer group that conserves, protects and promotes the Manuels River system).

“As well, we’ve discovered that we’ve had all kinds of volcanic action upriver here and the

geology of the rocks upriver is also very significant. For example, the rocks just below our bridge right here, scientists can prove that they were south of the equator a couple of hundred million years ago, no problem at all.”

Before the Society formed in 1992, the Manuels River was a dumping ground for everything from old cars to washing machines and other items that had outlived their use. Today, the Manuels River Linear Park is a tourist attraction that boasts more than six kilometres of walking trails, a boardwalk and lookouts where visitors and locals can drink in the beauty of the Manuels River valley and observe, in their natural habitat, all the plants and animals – everything from white birch and black spruce to red fox, muskrat and moose – that call it home.

“If you were at some other centre, some other site, you might have to go for miles and miles to see something. But here, you can see it right outside our doorway,” Gary says.

### **Fossil fanatics**

Speaking to Gary at the park’s visitor’s chalet, I notice his enthusiasm is matched by the two young children who have just hopped through the chalet’s doors. With their parents in tow, they make a beeline for the trilobite display and Gary smiles as they “Ooh” and “Aah” and press their noses against the glass for a better view.

“I went down and did a tour with some kids...they were seven years old, they were all in Grades 2 and 3





**Laura Gosine shows off some of the trilobite fossils at the Manuels River Linear Park's visitor's chalet.**

and I had about 80 of them. So we got downriver and the next thing, every single one of them put their hand down their pocket and pulled out their magnifying glass. And every one of them went over (and) started looking for fossils," Gary says.

"You know what? Not one of them came off that river 'til they found a fossil. I had to find 80 fossils that morning...They were beside themselves. It took me 65 or 70 minutes to get them off the river down there. And it was a cold day," he adds with a laugh.

Children aren't the only ones who are intrigued by the fossils found along Manuels River. In fact, some of these fossils are exhibited as far away as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and the Museum of Natural History in Geneva, Switzerland.

Dr. Riccardo Levi-Setti, a retired physics professor turned hobbyist paleontologist from the University of Chicago, has been doing research on the Manuels River fossils for more

than 35 years and has written three books on trilobites. In 1974, with the help of his Swedish colleague Jan Bergström, Levi-Setti unearthed the first specimen of the trilobite subspecies *Paradoxides davidis trapezopyge* at Manuels River.

"He's over 80 years old now and he was still down in the river, in the rain, digging away and trying to make new discoveries," says Nancy Bennett, the Society's communications coordinator.

Over the years, some of the river's fossils have been loaned to universities around the world. Levi-Setti has reclaimed over a dozen boxes of these fossils and brought them back to their rightful home.

"Some of them are very exquisite samples of fossils...and every one of them tells a story. Evolution is explained in a lot of those fossils," Gary says.

### **The Manuels River Experience**

Currently, the Manuels River Natural Heritage Society, the Rotary Club of Avalon Northeast and more than 30 volunteers (everyone from geologists and engineers to lawyers and public relations professionals) are working together to bring Manuels River's world-renowned fossils, geology and ecology to an even bigger stage. The result will be the Manuels River Hibernia Interpretation Centre (named for its major corporate sponsor). When complete, the eco-friendly, 13,000-square-foot building – designed by local architecture firm PHB Group Inc. – will house the finest collection of trilobite fossils in the world (many donated by Levi-Setti), as well as permanent and travelling exhibits, interactive displays, a research lab and archival space, a theatre and much more. The new centre will also have classrooms

where students of all ages can come and learn what makes the area so special, and the importance of keeping it clean, green and beautiful.

“Each of the programs for all the different grade levels will have a different focus. Some will focus on maybe water quality, some will focus on flowers and trees and flora and fauna. And once they come in our centre and do their courses, we’ll take them out for the day...then they can go out in the river and actually see all of it,” Gary says.

“And that’s the beauty. We like to use the words ‘living laboratory’ because you can have a laboratory in a building, but when you take the kids out and you go downstream and they actually start to go down and find the fossils...they are truly fascinated.”

Dubbing it the “Manuels River Experience,” the Society hopes the centre will draw even more visitors to the river and vice versa. There are also plans in place to upgrade Manuels River Linear Park by extending the trail system and adding several new lookouts.

Construction for the centre is slated to begin late this fall or early this coming spring, with the opening tentatively set for the spring of 2013.

“We have an \$8 million goal and

we’ve raised \$4.3 million so far. So we’re more than halfway there, but there is still a long way to go,” Nancy says.

“We would like this to be a real icon for the community...and be a source of real pride for CBS and extending into St. John’s, Paradise and Mount Pearl as well, and the rest of the island,” she says.

The goal is to make the new centre not just a quick pit stop, but a major destination for visitors from all over the world as they sample just some of the province’s hidden gems and vast, natural beauty.

“Our facilities right now are outdated and way too small. We’re looking to get into our new expanded facilities and offer different programs and give people more opportunities to utilize the river,” Gary says.

“We have all kinds of new plans. We want to make this building really central to this town. There’s no doubt about it.” 📧

*To find out how you can contribute to the building of the Manuels River Hibernia Interpretation Centre or the enhancement of the Manuels River Linear Park, visit [DownhomeLife.com](http://DownhomeLife.com) and click on “September Hot Links.”*



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