

# Land of Extremes

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**'ROCK TALKS'**

# DESERT MUSEUM

## Behind the scenes of new exhibit



Rock sections carved out of styrofoam in the Weldon Exhibits studio in San Francisco. COURTESY PHOTO

BY NEAL V. HITCH  
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On March 30, the Desert Museum began unloading and installing exhibit furniture for the new, permanent exhibit. One of the most common questions we are now being asked is: “When will you be open again?” Here’s a look behind-the-scenes of building what we believe will be one of our signature exhibit designs and how our opening plans are developing.

### Installing an exhibit

Phase 1 and phase 2 of the Land of Extremes permanent exhibit contain exhibits on archaeology, visible storage, a Lake Calhoun diorama, and our visitor services area. These areas will be defined by large reproduction rock elements.

Each of these fake rocks are based on real rocks you would find hiking in the Imperial Valley and were custom-made for our museum. They will contain panels that we are calling “Rock Talks” that have detailed interpretations and directions of places you can go and see.

The rocks throughout the Jacumba, In-Ko-Pah and Laguna mountains are Mesozoic granitics that formed deep in the earth. They are part of the same massive batholith that forms the core of the Sierra Nevada. A batholith is a large mass of igneous rock formed from cooling magma. In the case of our mountains, the molten rock oozed upward and cooled just beneath the surface. Groundwater then percolated down through cracks and slowly weathered the granite into spherical chunks that are exposed after topsoil eroded.

### Rocking a museum

Our fake rocks were designed and made at the workshop of Weldon Exhibits in San Francisco. The designers looked at photographs and rock samples that museum staff collected on hikes while we were developing what would be in the exhibit. Af-

ter receiving the references, designers built models scaled 1 inch per 1 foot. The scale models serve as a great problem-solving aspect of the process. The designers work out what features will work and how they will best fit in the space. Fred Nocella from Weldon Exhibits said, “Rocks may form in nature and break in perfect lines, in halves, or thirds, but when you reproduce that it looks fake. You have to make rocks that look more natural than natural rocks or no one will believe it.”

When it came time to build the full-scale pieces, large billets of foam were used. The foam was cut and shaped with hot wires and sharp knives. More defined features were added using smaller tools. A special plaster is used to coat the entire piece. Once absorbed by the foam, the plaster creates a protective shell that protects the rocks from damage. Finally, the shell is covered with a mixture that creates a “rocky” texture. The entire design must be built, taken apart, transported to its final destination, then rebuilt like the pieces of a puzzle. “It’s really fun,” Nocella added. “It’s like making abstract art in three dimensions.”

Each rock has taken a week to install at the museum. Once installed in its final location, it can take two or three days to paint. Painters need to apply multiple layers of paint, using reference photographs or rock samples to make sure the coloring is accurate.

The rocks installed in phase 1 and phase 2 will interpret



LEFT: Rock sections after installed and painted in museum.

BELOW: Rock Talk panels will interpret the rock elements in the new Land of Extremes exhibit at the Desert Museum. COURTESY PHOTOS

morteros that are found at Mortero Palms, pictographs found in Blair Valley, and the tufa covered rocks along the Santa Rosa Mountains. And though they look real – no climbing – they are really just big pieces of Styrofoam.

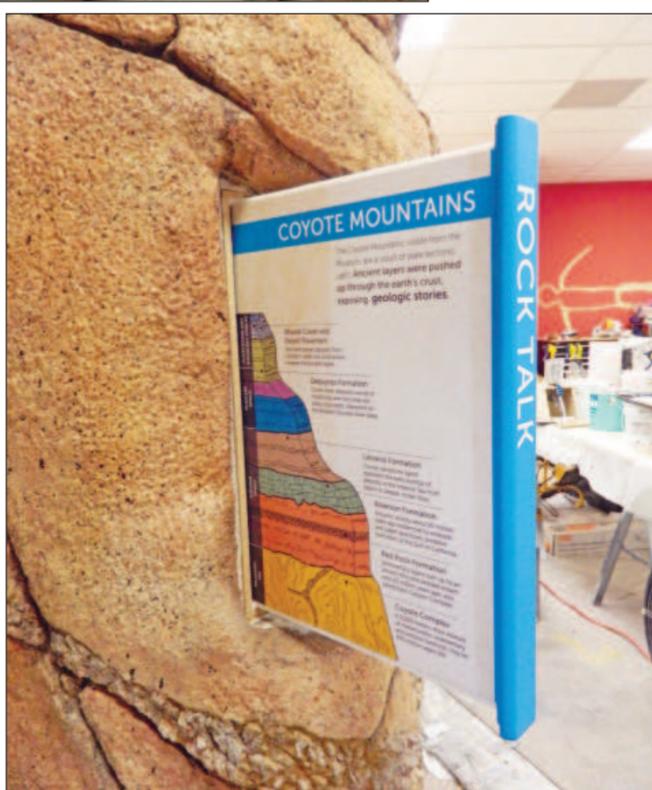
### When will we open

“When will you open?” is a question we have been getting a lot lately. Currently, we are installing the casework for phase 1 and phase 2 of our exhibit. This will take three weeks. Though this is a lot like installing furniture, it is big furniture, and just like at your house, it also requires a lot of painting and wallpapering. After installation, museum staff will have three weeks to complete painting, put back ceilings, and do a deep cleaning.

After the rocks and casework are installed and the museum cleaned up, we will be installing interactives, media and software. This entails setting up computers and LCD projectors and requires three more weeks to make sure everything is installed properly and running correctly.

After all of this, we will prepare artifacts for mounting and installation. This is the most complicated and time consuming step that museum staff will be doing. This will take most of the summer.

Phase 3 of the exhibit will cover the geology of Imperial Valley, and we are hoping that there will be public support to finish our exhibit sooner than



later. If this is the case, we will complete the final design for phase 3 in the fall and install these components this winter. This would allow us to have an official “grand opening” in the spring of next year.

Until then, we are planning a series of rolling soft openings for our members and a few for the public as exhibit software is tested and comes fully online or as artifacts get installed in specific cases.

We are not taking the traditional approach to opening a new museum where visitors

don’t see anything until a grand unveiling. We have had people come in the building throughout the process and many have seen the behind-the-scenes process that goes into building a permanent museum exhibit.

We want our visitors to feel involved every step of the way, and feel pride and ownership in a museum that they have watched grow into something truly special.

**Neal V. Hitch is director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum in Ocotillo.**