

Dig it! Museum spotlights soils

By LYNN BETTS

MILLIONS of people will better understand the importance of good soil as a result of a new exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution.

"Dig It — the Secrets of Soil" will be on display at the National Museum of Natural History through 2009.

The 5,000-square-foot exhibition opened July 19 on the second floor of the most visited natural history museum in the world, in the same building that displays the Hope Diamond.

"The display was in the planning stages for eight years," says Gary "Pete" Peterson, president of the Soil Science Society of America, the founding sponsor of the exhibition. "Soils will take center stage at the Smithsonian for 18 months, and then the exhibit will travel in five semitrailer trucks to other major museums and natural history and science centers across the country through the year 2013."

The Smithsonian invites visitors to "journey into the skin of the earth" to learn facts about soil including:

- There are more than 70,000 types of soil in the United States.

- One tablespoon of soil has more

organisms in it than people on Earth.

- The very best china dishes are made from soil.

- It takes more than 500 years to form 1 inch of topsoil.

- Most antibiotics used to fight infections are obtained from soil organisms.

- In 1 gram of soil, there are more than 5,000 different types of bacteria.

"In part of the exhibit, you feel like you are walking underground," says Patrick Megonigal, the exhibit's lead curator and a senior scientist at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center. "Then, in the All-American Soils area, you can find a soil monolith from your own state. We have core samples from every state that are displayed in a fashion that showcases the amazing variety of soils in color, texture and structure. We wanted people to see what soils are, how they form, and how different they are."

Exhibit panels examine how soil management can help meet modern-day demands for food production, infrastructure construction and environmental protection. A "Get Soil Savvy!" display uses dramatic images and video to explore the importance of soils in land management and conservation. There



DIVERSE: A core soil profile from every state in the U.S. is on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.

are nine different interactive stations and experiments.

Megonigal says the exhibition is designed to illustrate that the soil is alive, there are many different kinds of soils, and they change over time. It also stresses that soil is a critical link between land, air and water, and it is a resource that needs care.

Megonigal and Peterson were speakers at the 2008 annual meeting of the Soil and Water Conservation Society. Many local SWCS chapters, as well as hundreds of conservation districts,

helped fund the exhibition.

The lead sponsor is the Nutrients for Life Foundation of the Fertilizer Institute. Corporate sponsors include Syngenta, LL-COR Biosciences and Bayer CropScience. Among the supporting agencies are USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, Agricultural Research Service, Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

Betts writes from Johnston, Iowa.

■ For more information, visit www.soils.org/smithsonian.

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