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Projecto PaleoAngola: Geoheritage and Conservation Paleobiology as Science for Development in Angola

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Angola's diverse geological wonders extend from its cliff-lined Atlantic coast to the headwaters of the Okavango River, and from Cabinda north of the Congo River to the sand sea of Cunene in the south. Angola has arguably the most informative record of outcrops relating to the formation of the South Atlantic Ocean, and hence plate tectonics, of any country in the region. Much of Angola's national wealth derives from petroleum and diamonds. It has Cretaceous mammal tracks and dinosaur tracks with skin impressions from lacustrine deposits in the fourth largest diamond mine in the world. It also has a rich marine fossil record that provides a deep time perspective for the Benguela Current, which supports the Benguela Large Marine Ecosystem, one of the world's major fisheries, now under environmental threat. Yet Angola has no governmentally gazetted areas of geological significance. The objectives of our group, Projecto PaleoAngola, include establishing an inventory of significant geological heritage, development of infrastructure for the responsible care of geologically significant natural areas and the objects they contain, including fossils, and using these assets for education, outreach, and responsible development. To these ends we have used our results as an international cooperative research group to place an exhibit, "Sea Monsters Unearthed: Life in Angola's Ancient Seas," in the Smithsonian Institution in 2018, which will return to Angola in 2022. Students from Angola, Portugal, and the US were engaged in the development of the exhibit at every step. The exhibit has been viewed by millions of museum visitors thus far, and through Smithsonian publications and outreach, National Public Radio, and YouTube, as well as less formal social media. Thus, the exhibit has garnered visibility internationally and in Angola. In turn, that has brought attention at high levels, leading to discussions of permanent solutions and protocols for preserving geodiversity, geoconservation, and conservation paleobiology in the name of science for development in Angola.

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