



CORRESPONDENCE

## Age of Ancient White Sands, NM, Human Tracks Questioned

Stephen C. Jett  
scjett@hotmail.com

In the previous issue of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, I published a note on recent evidence bearing upon the question of the antiquity of the presence of humans in the New World (Jett, 2023)—historically, one of the most contentious topics in archaeology. One aspect of that discussion was the alleged presence, at White Sands, NM, of a line of human footprints dated to between 23,000 and 21,000 years ago (Bennett et al. 2020, 2021). However, *JSE* readers should be informed that since the publication of these findings, some of their aspects have been questioned, as has been very recently summarized by Bradley T. Lepper (2023), a conservative thinker on this and other archaeological topics.

The principal issue is the tracks' age. The age range Bennett et al. gave was based on radiocarbon dating of associated ditch-grass (*Ruppia*) seeds. However, critics pointed out that such seeds, if the plants had grown in lake water, could have been subject to the old-carbon effect, in which the water might have contained in solution older inorganic carbon, which would have yielded a falsely old date for the seeds (Madsen et al., 2022; Haynes, 2022). The original authors replied by pointing out that their dated seeds had come from river, not lake deposits, at a very shallow water depth (Pigati et al., 2022a). Oviatt et al. (2023) and Rachel et al. (2022) then raised the possibility that these seeds had not originated at the site but had been redeposited there after having been blown in from elsewhere (as from a nearby lakeshore) and could, therefore, be of an age greater than that of the tracks.

Pigati et al. (2022b) countered with the observation that datings of seeds from multiple layers had all come in in correct stratigraphic order—not an absolute impossibility even if all seeds displayed an old-carbon effect, pointed out Oviatt et al. (2023). These points have caused many archaeologists to suspend judgment concerning the real age of the tracks.

The original papers reported what they saw as an association between the line of presumed human-made tracks and one of megafauna tracks, suggesting possible inter-specific interaction. However, Rachel et al. (2022) questioned the assertion that these tracks had been made more or less simultaneously. Further, Rachel et al. raised the question as to whether some (although not all) of the prints Bennett et al. classed as human were, in fact, such, proposing the possibility that those poorly preserved marks may, instead, be eroded sloth tracks.

Still, of these, several cited scientists who have questioned the quality of evidence concerning the White Sands tracks, only Haynes—an originator decades ago of the “Clovis-first” model of the peopling of the Americas—rejected the possibility of the human tracks being at least in part and to a degree, pre-Clovis in age.

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