



**House  
Legislative  
Analysis  
Section**

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**STATE FOSSIL: MASTODON**

**Senate Bill 397 as passed by the Senate  
First Analysis (3-7-02)**

**Sponsor: Sen. Thaddeus G. McCotter  
House Committee: House Oversight and  
Operations  
Senate Committee: Government  
Operations**

***THE APPARENT PROBLEM:***

The state currently has thirteen state designated symbols: a flower (the apple blossom), bird (the robin), tree (the white pine), stone (the Petoskey stone), gem (chlorastrolite), fish (the brook trout), soil (Kalkaska sand), reptile (the painted turtle), game mammal (the white-tailed deer), and wildflower (dwarf lake iris) as well as a flag, coat-of-arms, and seal. In recent years, school teachers have sometimes had their classes propose a new state symbol as part of learning about state government. For instance, during the previous legislative session, a group of fourth-graders who had researched the soybean as part of learning how a legislative bill becomes law lobbied to have the soybean recognized as the state plant. Other recent proposals for state symbols have included recognizing a state dog (the golden retriever), children’s book (The Legend of Sleeping Bear), burger (the cherry burger), insect (the green darner dragonfly), agricultural insect (the honeybee), and waltz (“The Wolverine Waltz”).

Last year, Dave Thomas, a Washtenaw Community College geology professor, proposed officially recognizing the mastodon as the state fossil. Through his web site Professor Thomas has solicited support from K-12 students and teachers across the state and enlisted the support of Jeffrey Bradley, a science teacher at Slauson Middle School in Ann Arbor, and his extremely dedicated eighth-grade students. While spearheading the “Mastodon for Michigan” campaign, the students built a life-size replica of a mastodon out of paper by extrapolating the size from a mastodon footprint, raised \$1,000 for the mastodon exhibit at the University of Michigan’s Museum of Natural History, collected thousands of petition signatures supporting the idea of making the mastodon the state fossil, and staged a pro-mastodon rally on the steps of the Capitol Building. Legislation has been introduced that would create a fourteenth state symbol, making the mastodon the state fossil.

***THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:***

The bill would designate the mastadon (*Mammut americanum*) as the official state fossil.

***FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:***

According to both the Senate Fiscal Agency and the House Fiscal Agency, the bill would have no fiscal impact on either the state or local units of government. (2-11-02; 2-28-02)

***ARGUMENTS:***

***For:***

Over 30 states currently have state fossils, and although Michigan’s official state stone—the Petoskey stone—is technically fossilized colonial coral, Michigan does not have an official state fossil. The mastodon would make a truly awe-inspiring state symbol. Mastodons, now extinct, were large mammals, similar in appearance and size to related species such as woolly mammoths (also extinct) and modern elephants. Scientists believe that mastodons roamed Michigan as recently as 10,000 years ago, when the state’s other non-human residents included mammoths, woodland musk oxen, Scott’s moose, and black bear-sized beavers. Though the state may not be able to boast the large quantities of mastodon “digesta” that have been found in Florida, bones, teeth, and other remains from over 250 mastodons have been found in Michigan. Moreover, the world’s only (known) mastodon footprints—those of a large male, a female, and a calf—were excavated in Michigan’s own Saline Township.

Designating the mastodon as the official state fossil would have a profound educational impact on the state’s residents by bringing attention to an aspect of Michigan’s history that schoolchildren and adults currently know very little about. Since mastodons lived alongside modern human beings, official recognition of their role in human history would

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encourage schools and museums to educate the public about relations between modern humans and mastodons. Though people often associate anthropology and prehistory with excavations performed in remote and exotic corners of the world that they may never have a chance to visit, focusing attention on the mastodon's interaction with earlier generations of Michiganians would serve as a useful reminder that people can learn about their distant ancestors on a very local level. Although many other creatures inhabited the state and interacted with previous residents, the mastodon's large size and extinct status make the animal an especially exciting topic of inquiry and investigation. This is particularly true of children who seem to have an instinctive curiosity about dinosaurs and other large, prehistoric beasts; however, a child who expresses intellectual interest often stimulates parents, teachers, and other adults to take an active interest in the subject as well. Though size and extinct status could be used to support designating the mammoth, which also roamed Michigan, the state fossil, the number of mastodon bones and teeth found throughout the state far outweighs the number of mammoth remains.

Designating the mastodon as the state fossil would also have other educational benefits for children. In their study of the mastodon, Slauson Middle School students honed their mathematical skills, learned about geology, created artwork, wrote songs, and even issued press releases and conducted media interviews. Moreover, many of the Slauson students have devoted their time and energy to the state fossil project beyond required class time—something that is just a distant dream for many parents and teachers. Although some of these activities were directly related to the students' lobbying efforts, the mastodon clearly provides a distinct focal point around which educators will easily motivate student interest. In conclusion, to quote the Slauson students' mantra, "Now the Mastodon, hairy and colossal, should become our state fossil."

### ***Against:***

While it is a worthwhile civics exercise for students to promote and testify on behalf of legislation, many people believe that there are already more than enough—if not too many—state symbols. If there is to be a state fossil, then the mastodon is as good a candidate as any and perhaps it is even better than the others; however, it is not clear that the state needs an official fossil. Although supporters have made a good case supporting the importance of mastodon to understanding Michigan and its history, the state could promote awareness of the mastodon without designating a state fossil.

### ***POSITIONS:***

The Michigan Earth Science Teachers Association supports the bill. (3-6-02)

The Michigan Science Teachers Association supports the bill. (3-6-02)

Slauson Middle School science teacher Jeffrey Bradley and several of his students testified in support of the bill. (3-6-02)

Analyst: J. Caver

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.