DESTROYING TRACKS OF HISTORY AT UCONN:

There's a cover-up taking place at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. This cover-up does not involve fiscal auditing irregularities or construction mismanagement. Instead, it involves the rampant growth of shrubs over a prime specimen of Eubrontes giganteus.

What on earth is that?

It has three toes with curved claws. It's big, up to 20 inches long. And it's been the official Connecticut state fossil since 1991.

Eubrontes giganteus is the footprint of a large carnivorous Jurassic dinosaur that prowled our state about 200 million years ago. Think of this creature as a giant two-legged bird with sharp teeth, one big enough to easily eat the largest dog in your neighborhood.

These unmistakable footprints were named in 1845 by the Rev. Edward Hitchcock, then a professor at Amherst College. Like many of his 19th-century intellectual contemporaries, Professor Hitchcock took natural history very seriously, theologically as well as scientifically.

Eubrontes translates from Latin as "true thunder." Giganteus translates as "huge." Hence, the next time you hear a powerful summer thunderstorm, think of our lovely state fossil being attached to a bloodthirsty carnivore that is roaring directly at you.

There are no bones associated with the Eubrontes tracks. Hence, to reconstruct the creature's appearance, paleontologists matched the size, shape and geological age of the Connecticut footprints to skeletal remains from other localities. Based on the footprint anatomy -- sharp claws, narrow foot with small heel, erect posture, long stride -- the best match was for an early meat-eating dinosaur from Arizona known as Dilophosaurus. This dinosaur reached nearly 4 feet tall at the hips and was about 15 feet long. Yikes!

In 1966, workers made a stunning discovery of Eubrontes tracks when a bedrock ledge in Rocky Hill was being excavated for a state highway department testing facility. As the layers of rock were being removed, the crew discovered one of the most significant dinosaur trackways in the world. On an inclined rock layer were nearly 2,000 Eubrontes footprints along with tracks and trails of other creatures and with hundreds of curious sedimentary features indicating a lakeshore environment. It was as if some ancient subtropical scene had been frozen in time upon the slab of stone.

Within three weeks, the construction project was halted, experts were called in, committees began deliberating, newspapers were advocating for protection. Finally, Gov. John Dempsey designated the fossil locality as a state park. Dinosaur State Park and Arboretum has since become one of Connecticut's premier tourist attractions.

About 15 years ago, a slab full of footprints was brought from the same geological formation to the heart of the Storrs campus at UConn. There, it was proudly exhibited within a collection of large stones dubbed Geology Park, then a well-labeled outdoor exhibit seen and appreciated by thousands of students, many of whom were mine. But as the central campus was renovated, Geology Park fell into neglect.

In Rocky Hill, the Eubrontes tracks are covered by an aluminum geodesic dome, protected by security alarms and climate control. In Storrs, however, the tracks are being covered and destroyed by vegetation overgrowth. Organic litter falls from the flowering shrubs above. Mildew grows in the
shade. Blobs of chewing gum are furtively tossed beneath the bushes directly onto the state fossil. I suspect the littering students don't even know it's there.

So lamentable is the condition of this important slab of rock that I sometimes wonder whether the vegetative cover-up isn't secretly planned by a biblical creationist on the landscaping crew, one who's trying to hide this powerful reminder of organic evolution.

But, of course, this is merely paranoia on my part. What's really taking place is a spectacular example of community ignorance regarding the fossil record in general and an important state symbol in particular.

It's time for an SOS. Save our slab of Eubrontes giganteus.