Conservation Work Continues at Scotty’s Castle

Scotty’s Castle located in the northern region of Death Valley National Park has been closed since October 18, 2015 when almost three inches of rain fell on the Scotty’s Castle area in Grapevine Canyon. The flash flood that ensued dramatically changed the landscape, the road and utilities were destroyed and some buildings damaged. Repairs are estimated at $47 million and are being funded over multiple years from a number of sources: park entrance fees, Federal Highways Administration, National Park Service deferred maintenance accounts, and donations.

Post flood, Death Valley National Park has requested funding from the Death Valley Natural History Association to assist with funding several curatorial projects at Scotty’s Castle including: treatment of the silver collection, conservation of the Scotty’s Castle Upper Music Room Curtains, and repairs to the Scotty’s Castle Welte-Mignon Theatre Organ, currently underway.

The Death Valley Natural History Association recently presented a check in the amount of $41,420 to fund the reproduction of eight leather curtains in the Great Hall of Scotty’s Castle. The original painted and tooled sheepskin curtains are severely deteriorated. After 90 years of use in the desert, they have desiccation, tears, fading, cracking and loss of tassels. A professional conservation examination in 2012 determined that the curtains are beyond repair. All curtains at Scotty’s Castle have an important function in protecting sensitive historic furnishings and textiles from further UV damage and also allow visitors to visualize the space as it was when occupied by the Johnsons in the 1930s.

A complex undertaking, leather stamps for this project were manufactured in 2018 using NPS funding and artisans capable of stamping, cutting, coloring, and sewing the fully replicated reproductions took years to find. Appropriate weight and color matched leather is being sourced and artisans are now ready to begin work.

“This is the perfect timing for preservation and conservation work to take place while the collection has been taken out of Scotty’s Castle. Due to lack of temperature and humidly controls the entire collection normally housed within the Castle was removed for its protection. We have been working as fast as we can to raise money so that necessary repairs to collection items can be made and so that the historic house can be reopened as complete as possible,” said David Blacker Executive Director of the Death Valley Natural History Association. “It all takes time and people willing to contribute.”
Signed into law on March 12, 2019, the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act transferred approximately 35,000 acres of land from the Bureau of Land Management to the National Park Service at Death Valley National Park. Death Valley National Park increased in size by 1% to 3,422,024 total acres. Another part of what the act did was designate some of the existing land within Death Valley National Park as Wilderness that wasn’t already protected in this way. Death Valley National Park Wilderness is now 93%, an addition of 87,999 acres.

The park is the sixth largest wilderness area in the nation and the largest area outside of Alaska.
Things sure have changed since I was a kid. I don’t know about you but I’m finding myself saying that more and more each year. I like to think of myself as a rather average American; I’m not a big fan of change. Of course, change is inevitable, but when you live in a national park, things work a little differently. You can literally come year after year and stand in the same spot and see the same thing. Maybe the weather and lighting will be different, but the view is unchanged, the scenery preserved. We carry a book in our store called “Treasures of the National Parks Yesterday & Today”. It shows historic photos in national parks with a side-by-side comparison of a photo of today, and you really can’t see a difference.

In national parks preservation is our business and business is not easy. It’s not easy because the other part of the National Park Service mission is to make these places accessible to the public. How do you protect and preserve and make the land accessible to the public? This is something that our National Park partners balance all the time. All of us here at DVNHA are proud to work with these incredible professionals. They go out of their way to keep areas open and reopen closed areas so that the public can access these places of wonder. Keane Wonder Mine is a great example, so is Scotty’s Castle. At no time during the clean-up, recovery, or the beginning of repairs did anyone at any level suggest keeping the historic district permanently closed, and we are thrilled to have been able to raise and fund almost $150,000 thousand dollars to help preserve Scotty’s Castle so that people can enjoy it for many years to come.

But what about our partner at Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge? They are responsible for returning this one-of-a-kind habitat back to its natural state. This is a difficult task because no one alive today knows what the area looked like before the settlers started planting alfalfa and digging ditches to irrigate. The amount of work U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has done to return the springs back to natural flows—in which both the endemic plant and animal species can not only be protected, but thrive is amazing! DVNHA has just celebrated our 10th anniversary of partnership with Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge and we look forward to another decade.

So what does this new year have in store? DVNHA is budgeted to give our partners almost $450,000 in aid! This is the biggest single year of aid in the history of Death Valley Natural History Association: two projects at Scotty’s Castle, repairs to hydrology equipment, and interns to monitor endangered plants at Eureka Dunes will be part of the work at Death Valley National Park. At Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge we will continue our support of the visitor operations as well as the work of volunteer biologists, botanists, and ecologist who work closely with Ash Meadows staff to continue their restoration work.

We could not do this work without the contributions of YOU, our dedicated donors and members. The only reason we can offer this amount of aid is because of your support. Thank you! We hope you keep warm, have an enjoyable winter and that you will be able to visit this spring and see the flowers to come.
The Scotty’s Castle Historic District is now expected to reopen in fall 2021.

During the closure, there are limited opportunities to visit Scotty’s Castle with a park ranger and see first-hand how the power of water shapes the landscape of Death Valley, listen to the stories of this unique palace in the desert, the people who called it home, and the projects underway to reopen this historic district. This season’s tours are offered Sundays, December 8, 2019 through April 12, 2020. Reservations are required in advance. Tickets are $25 per person, available online at dvnha.org. Proceeds from the tour benefit the Scotty’s Castle Historic Preservation Fund to support conservation and preservation projects at Scotty’s Castle.

How can you help?

You can make an additional donation to the Scotty’s Castle Historic Preservation Fund. Payment options include: online at dvnha.org, by phone 1-800-478-8564 ext. 10, or mail a check payable to: DVNHA, PO Box 188, Death Valley, CA 92328. Please memo: Scotty’s Castle.

An additional $25,000 is needed for conservation treatment of the Scotty’s Castle Dining Room Curtains.

Save the Date!

- Ash Meadows Junior Refuge Ranger Day
  February 1, 2020

- Dark Sky Fest
  February 21-23, 2020

- National Park Week begins
  April 18, 2020

- 2nd Death Valley Science Conference
  June 4-6, 2020