



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Virginia Museum of Natural History scientists confirm discovery of 500 million-year-old fossil**

**MARTINSVILLE, Va.** (June 27, 2008) – Virginia Museum of Natural History scientists have confirmed that an approximately 500 million-year-old stromatolite was recently discovered at the Boxley Blue Ridge Quarry near Roanoke, Virginia. This specimen is the first-ever intact stromatolite head found in Virginia, and is one of the largest complete “heads” in the world, at over 5 feet in diameter and weighing over 2 tons. Stromatolites are among the earliest known life forms, and are important in helping scientists understand more about environments that existed in the past.

A stromatolite is a mound produced in shallow water by mats of algae that trap mud and sand particles. Another mat grows on the trapped sediment layer and this traps another layer of sediment, growing gradually over time. Stromatolites can grow to heights of a meter or more. They are uncommon today but their fossils are among the earliest evidence for living things. The oldest stromatolites have been dated at 3.46 billion years old. They were discovered in 1999 in Western Australia, near the town of Marble Bar.

The Boxley stromatolite was discovered by Boxley employees in a pile of loose rock they were moving. The curious shape of the “rock” initiated a call to Tom Roller, Boxley’s professional geologist, who immediately suspected it to be a stromatolite. Scientists from the Virginia Museum of Natural History traveled to the quarry to evaluate the discovery and confirmed it to be a stromatolite.

The stromatolite has been donated by Boxley to the Virginia Museum of Natural History, where it will be displayed in the coming months.

“Education about the Earth and its geologic wonders is something we feel strongly about at Boxley,” said Jeff Perkins, Boxley executive vice president-aggregates. “We feel the best place for the stromatolite is at the Virginia Museum of Natural History where it can be viewed by the public and accessible to scientists who are seeking to unravel the mysteries of our past.”

Although fragments and sections of stromatolites are fairly common, it is very rare for a whole stromatolite head to be collected intact. This specimen is particularly unusual because the top surface of the head is very well preserved.

“The exquisite preservation of the surface of this stromatolite will allow museum scientists a rare opportunity not only to look at the stromatolite itself, but also to look for other organisms that may have been living on or around it,” said Dr. James Beard, assistant director of research and collections for earth sciences, and curator of earth sciences at the Virginia Museum of Natural History.

“We are very pleased that Boxley donated this very rare whole stromatolite “head” to the Virginia Museum of Natural History so that our scientists can understand more about environments that existed in the past and so we can display it for museum visitors to see,” said Ryan Barber, director of marketing and external affairs at the Virginia Museum of Natural History. “It is especially exciting to have this stromatolite that is estimated at 500 million years old which will allow us to expand our ‘Uncovering Virginia’ exhibit gallery which currently goes back 300 million years ago. This is indeed a very important discovery and proves that much still remains to be discovered and there remain important discoveries and challenges for our young scientists of tomorrow.”

#### **About the Virginia Museum of Natural History**

The Virginia Museum of Natural History in Martinsville seeks to increase understanding of and appreciation for the natural history of the Commonwealth through education, research, collections, publications and exhibits. The Museum – an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution – is accredited by the American Association of Museums, a distinction earned by fewer than 10 percent of museums in the United States. The Museum is a member of the Association of Science-Technology Centers, Virginia Association of Museums, Heritage Preservation, and is an agency of the Secretary of Natural Resources for the Commonwealth of Virginia. For more information, visit [www.vmnh.net](http://www.vmnh.net).

#### **About Boxley**

Since 1892, Boxley has supplied quality construction materials to communities in central and western Virginia and West Virginia. Boxley quarries rock used to produce aggregate, block, and concrete. Boxley products are essential in the construction of homes, schools, hospitals, buildings, and landscaping as well as the maintenance and construction of roads and bridges. Boxley is actively involved in the communities it serves through programs such as Boxley Explore the Earth for schoolchildren and Boxley Community Giving. For additional information, visit [www.boxley.com](http://www.boxley.com).

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Geologist Tom Roller with stromatolite at Boxley's Blue Ridge Quarry

