A prehistoric cradle of all

The Abu Dhabi of eight million years ago was a lush green home to many now-extinct beasts, say archaeologists.

A sabre-toothed big cat lurks in the tall savannah grass, surveying a herd of antelope as they amble along towards a wide-flowing river, where a herd of antelope and a herd of elephant are busy watering themselves. Oblivious to the life-threatening situation, an old antelope lowers its mouth to the water and sips as the stealthy feline predator moves in for the kill. At that very moment, a wide-jawed crocodile leaps from the river and brings the thirsty bovine down into a watery grave.

The scene is not the prelude to a Hollywood caveman movie or a wildlife documentary’s description of tropical African plains – but rather a slice of life in Abu Dhabi eight million years ago, according to top UAE-based archaeologist Dr. Mark Beech.

“Many of the expats and Arabs living here think that the UAE is just a desert, and that there was nothing here before they discovered oil and could afford to build skyscrapers,” he says.

“But this is a misconception. People find it astonishing that eight million years ago Abu Dhabi had freshwater rivers everywhere and that it was much greener than it is today."

Intensive Research

This prehistoric portrait of the region was only possible after years of painstaking research, says Dr. Beech, sitting in his cluttered office at the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (Adias) headquarters. Archaeologists started digging in the UAE region in 1959, he says, and the study accelerated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, thanks to the combined efforts of Andrew Hill, from Yale University, and the Natural History Museum’s Peter Whybrow, who died last year.

Archaeologists have focused on the Abu Dhabi coastline and discovered more than 10,000 fossils, including ostrich eggshells, elephant teeth, freshwater clamshells and the ankle bone of a sabre-toothed cat in Kihal. Other key finds include a wolverine jawbone in Hamra, a 2.5m elephant tusk in Ruwais, and the combined haul of a young hippo’s jaw, an elephant’s foot, and a sabre-toothed cat in Kihal.

Less well-known species of animals have even earned their name from the emirate they once inhabited, with the gerbil Abudhabia baynunensis and the three-toed horse Hipparion abudhabiense being two examples.

In the late Miocene period, Abu Dhabi had vast savannah plains with rivers where hyenas, giraffes, baboons, three-toed horses, gazelles and ostriches roamed the prehistoric landscape. Over millions of years, this once fertile region has turned years have brought evolutionary changes, adds Dr. Beech, who says some of the species are no longer found on the planet.

Two varieties of elephants once roamed the lands. One species, called Deinotheres, sported two downward-curved tusks on its lower jaw, while the more prevalent Stegotetrabelodon syrticus had two enormous upper-jaw tusks and a smaller pair on the lower jaw for rooting through dense vegetation. Large crocodiles and a slender-jawed relative lurked in the muddy river waters while sabre-toothed cats – with the size, stealth and power of a tiger – waited in the greenery for a chance to kill.

Less well-known species of animals have even earned their name from the emirate they once inhabited, with the gerbil Abudhabia baynunensis and the three-toed horse Hipparion abudhabiense being two examples.