The Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (Adias), was formed in 1992 on the instruction of the late President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, to survey, record and – where appropriate – excavate archaeological sites on Abu Dhabi’s coast and islands. Archaeological sites of relevance can be found on almost every one of the emirate’s examined islands. The Abu Dhabi coastline, especially raised areas and former shorelines, has also yielded many heritage sites. Adias is partly funded by the Private Department of the President and receives corporate support. Over the next year, Adias is set to become part of the new Abu Dhabi Culture and Heritage Authority.

Creatures big and small

Hippopotamuses, antelopes and crocodiles

We now have quite a lot of knowledge about Abu Dhabi in the Miocene period

Around 9,000 years ago, the climate of the UAE area became more hospitable, and people from the early civilisation of Mesopotamia began sailing down the Gulf coast, mingling with the early Arabs. The first signs of human civilisation on UAE soil are on the island of Marawah, dating back 7,500 years, where remains indicate that the early Emiratis kept animals and traded pottery and other goods with their Middle East neighbours.

Raising Awareness

These cycles of environmental change are one of the key issues that Dr Beech hopes the Adias book and exhibition will raise.

"It is of key importance to teach people about the environment here," he says.

"You don’t know where you got all your money from. Once the oil runs out, will there be enough money to pay for watering the trees?" he says, adding that awareness of environmental issues is growing.

"In recent years, there have been attempts to make the desert green, with forestry and irrigation projects. But they need water and money. Once the oil runs out, will there be enough money to pay for watering the trees?"

"Like this, the desert becomes green, but then it goes back to being a desert again."

The discovery of preserved elephant footprints at Almas yielded intriguing results, says Dr Beech. Researchers measured the distance of the strides and compared them to those of a modern Asian elephant from Blackpool Zoo in England.

Comparing the digits lines indicates the thick-skinned mammals that once roamed the UAE were considerably larger than those found on the Indian Subcontinent today.

"We now have quite a lot of knowledge about Abu Dhabi in the late Miocene period, between six and eight million years ago," says Dr Beech.

"But the area we have investigated is only a tiny percentage of the amount of fossils that exist – there is plenty more work to do.

One of the most exciting finds has been the canine tooth of a baboon-like creature in Jebel Dhanna, says the senior resident archaeologist, marking one of only two primate finds on the Arabian peninsula.

Researchers recently discovered the bones of human precursors from the late Miocene period while digging in Chad, says Dr Beech. The finds whetted the appetite of archaeologists.