Chinese paleontologists discover fossilized remains of largest land mammal to ever inhabit the Earth

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In mid-June, a research team from the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology (IVPP) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences lead by professor Deng Tao published their findings of a new species of Paraceratherium along the border of the Tibetan plateau.

Today, the largest mammal to walk the Earth is the African bush elephant. While a sight to behold, this contemporary behemoth of the African plains pales in comparison to the Paraceratherium, the largest mammal to ever walk the Earth. While appearing to be some strange mix of a giraffe and an elephant, Paraceratherium was in fact a giant early rhinoceros. The ancient rhino's skull alone was roughly the size of a human torso while the animal's shoulders would have reached five meters above the ground. *Paraceratherium linxiense* is named after the Linxia Basin in central China where its fossils were discovered.

According to the University of Montpellier's rhino paleontologist Pierre Olivier, in comments made to *National Geographic*, Paraceratherium would have been able "to eat flowers at the third or fourth floor of a building" today. The animal's very own steps would have been felt through the earth, as estimates suggest it could have weighed a whopping 20 tonnes.

Deng's team found that early species of Paraceratherium spread to central and south Asia around 43 million years ago. Millions of years later, it crossed what is now the Tibetan plateau seeking a humid environment. These findings suggest the Tibetan plateau was not elevated at the time, and its increased elevation is the cause of its modern aridity.

This giant mammal led an existence similar to a modern giraffe, feeding on huge amounts of plants throughout the Oligocene, a period lasting from 34 to 23 million years ago. It lived in a massive area encompassing what is now modern-day Eurasia. It had little to fear from nearby predators, with the exception of Astorgosuchus, a massive crocodile that would often exceed 10 meters in length. Evidence suggests it would prey upon even fully grown members of Paraceratherium.

The findings give paleontologists clues as to how this rhino genus spread across what is now Eurasia. Paraceratherium likely had social structures and reproductive cycles not dissimilar from the modern elephant, living in small social groups where females would guard younger members of the species. Males would live solitary lives, only approaching other members of its species to mate or compete for resources.

Ironically it was likely gomphotheres, an ancestor and relative of elephants, that likely drove Paraceratherium to extinction. Like elephants, gomphotheres were mixed browsers, feeding on both grasses and trees. This enabled them to become ecosystem engineers, as their feeding habits were extremely damaging to foliage, producing an ecosystem that had significantly fewer trees. For Paraceratherium, a large mammal that spent most of its waking hours browsing on trees, this change in plant composition proved devastating and it fell into extinction.

This change was not restricted to Paraceratherium's range, as gomphothere descendants spread across the world. The engineering opened new ecological niches and in turn enabled animals more closely resembling modern rhinos to diversify and eventually become the horned beasts we know today.

These discoveries have provided numerous fascinating insights into the world of millions of years ago. However, modern military conflicts and wars for the control of resources in central Asia have greatly reduced science's ability to understand these magnificent beasts. According to paleontologist Donald Prothero, efforts to explore the region continue despite being "extremely dangerous now because of warfare between the tribal chiefs and the Pakistani government, Taliban insurgents, Islamic extremists, and the spillover of the military conflict in Afghanistan."

In 2006, the most remarkably preserved remains of these animals were annihilated. Excavated by a French team of paleontologists in the hills near the village of Dera Bugti, Pakistan, in 1999, the region was controlled by Akbar Bugti, the head of the Bugti tribe, a group consisting of an estimated 180,000 people. The elder Bugti was an invaluable source of information and protection for the scientists as they searched for bones, eventually recovering a nearly complete skeleton of Paraceratherium.

However, before they could be removed for further research, repeated bombings related to the Pakistani army's suppression of the Baloch people in the region led to their destruction. The bombings that destroyed the fossils were part of a deliberate campaign to terrorize the local population.

Furthermore, efforts throughout the 20th century to construct a full skeleton of Paraceratherium suffered complications due to the remains being scattered across eastern, central and western Asia. Due to the rivalries between Soviet, Chinese and Western imperialist governments, little collaborative study was carried out.

Instead, scientists often led duplicate efforts and published findings that were inaccessible to outsiders. To this day, conflict embroils the region, as Chinese efforts to economically integrate the region and exploit fuel resources have provoked backlash from the local populations as well as US-backed efforts to sabotage Chinese pipelines.

These conflicts are not only an affront to the people of the region, but a blow to the scientific understanding of people around the world. The history of life on Earth belongs to all of humanity, regardless of region. The subordination of life to the capitalist profit system not only threatens human knowledge but the very existence of life on Earth.