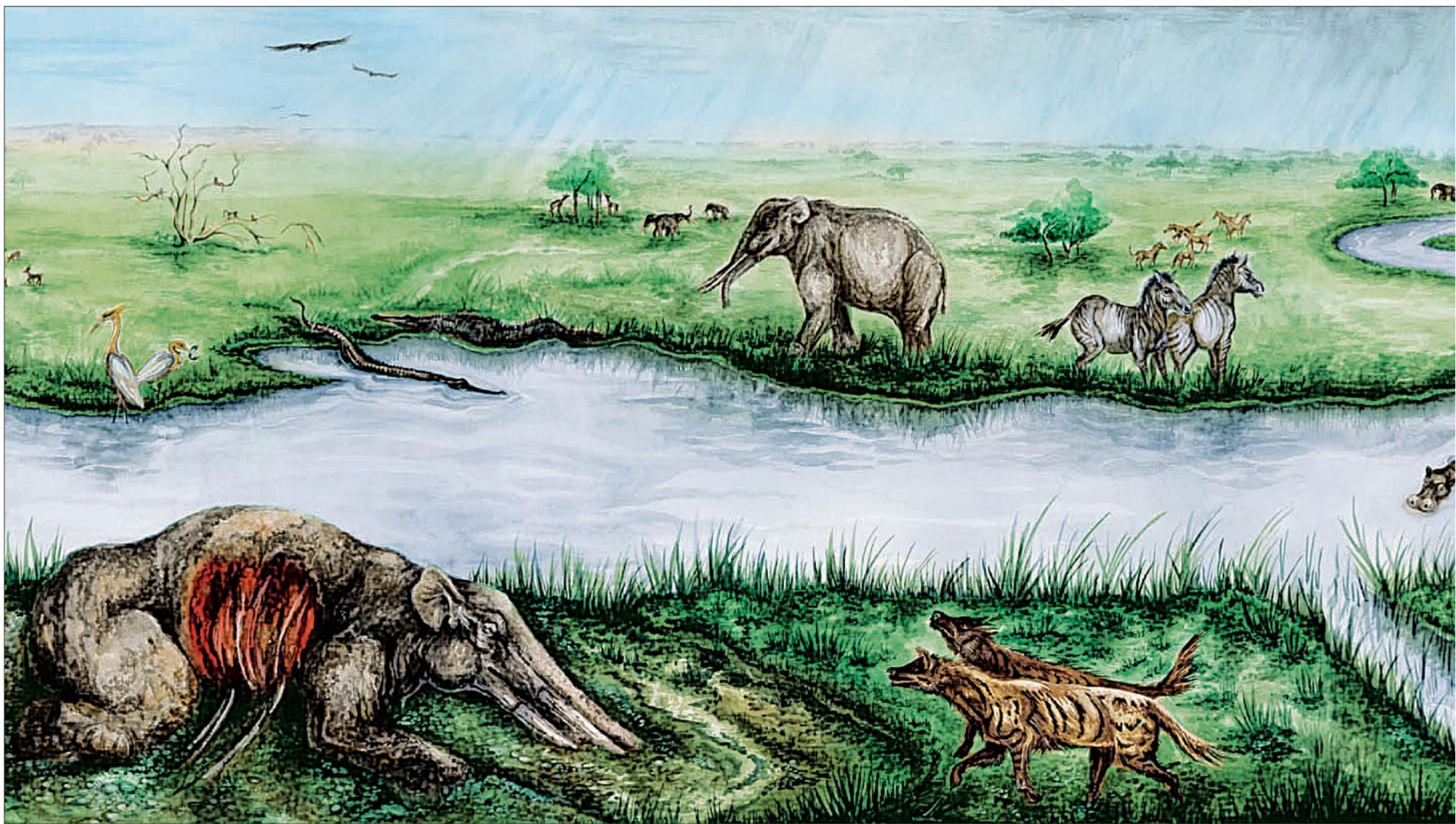


Focus Today



■ 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

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 hippopotami and four-tusked elephants 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.



JAMES REIL
DEPUTY FEATURES EDITOR

“It had green vegetation and was wooded with acacia-like trees, very much like East Africa nowadays, with wet and dry seasons. It probably looked something like a protected game reserve in Kenya,” he continues.

Instead of the saltwaters of the Arabian Gulf there lay vast savannah plains with perennial rivers that flowed into a massive channel that continued along the route of the Euphrates and the Tigris towards the Indian Ocean, near the present-day Straits of Hormuz, says Dr Beech.

Hyenas and wolverines were among the many predators to roam the green prehistoric landscape, with giraffes, baboons, three-toed horses, gazelles and ostriches also gracing the emirate's ancient plains.

The passing of eight million

years has 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 *Stegotetabelodon syrticus* had two enormous upper-jaw tusks and a smaller pair on the lower jaw for rooting through dense undergrowth.

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.

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 anklebone 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



■ The tooth of a *Stegotetabelodon syrticus*, one of the two elephant species to roam Abu Dhabi NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, LONDON