

» INSIDE ADIAS

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.

TALK BACK

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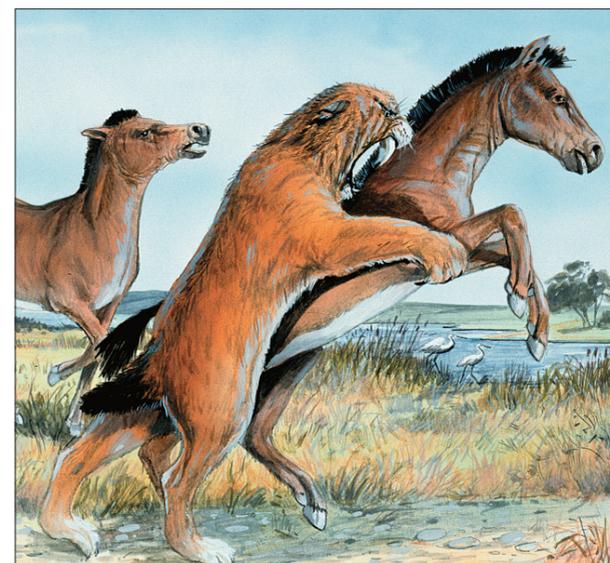


into the desert it is today

ADIAS



This set of ancient elephant footprints at Meisa shows the beasts were bigger than today's



A sabre-toothed cat attacks a three-toed horse

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, LONDON



A herd of Deinotheres forages for food

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creatures big and small

skull and a giraffe's leg bone in Shuwaihat.

The discovery of preserved elephant footprints at Meisa 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.

The comparison of stride lengths indicates that 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

across Africa and the Middle East for fresh discoveries that could provide a glimpse at the origin of mankind.

"We haven't found any fossils of humans here, but that is not to say that there weren't any human-type apes in this environment," says the 42-year-old.

"Because of the environment, I don't see any reason why there shouldn't be any here. There have got to be other types of apes living in this environment because there were plenty of food and vegetation for them.

"Perhaps some day, someone will find an exciting specimen here and everyone will sit up and take notice."

Although the archaeologists have gathered masses of information on the period, much of which is on exhibition in the Adias foyer and available in *Abu*

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

Dhabi Eight Million Years Ago, edited by Dr Beech and Adias executive director Peter Hellyer, they cannot answer all the questions about the UAE's past.

THREAT OF DEVELOPMENT

"People ask us what kind of dinosaurs roamed this area, but we don't have access to the rocks of the right age," says Dr Beech. "We only have fossil records for certain time periods."

Many of the samples from the late Miocene period were found very close to the surface, Dr Beech adds, suggesting the layers of earth from subsequent periods had been deposited and then

eroded away. However, the exposure of fossilised remains to the elements is jeopardising discoveries in the future, he says.

"Some of the main fossil sites that were found in the 1980s and 1990s are getting damaged because of development on the coast," he says. "Other stuff is getting destroyed before it has been recorded or recovered."

However, it is not only the fast pace of construction that is threatening the UAE's remains, but petrolheads who take their four-wheel drive vehicles into the desert for dune bashing, says Dr Beech with concern. "The small plain areas between sand dunes

are some of the key areas for finding archaeological remains," he says. "Excessive driving in the desert can damage these remains; especially the big rallies."

While the antelopes, elephants and ostriches enjoyed thousands of years of lush vegetation during the Miocene period, the sands of time were running out as desertification took hold.

"It probably started gradually, much like a drought in modern-day Africa," says Dr Beech.

"It begins with one or two bad seasons when there is not enough water in the watering holes. The rivers dry up, the plants die, and the animals die. "The population decreases over a few years, and then you get a population crash."

Powerful winds spread sand and sediment across the region and the forces of nature turned the once-virile region into the barren desert it is today.

The Arabian Gulf basin did not start filling up until around 18,000 years ago when the frozen waters of the last Ice Age began to thaw, says Dr Beech.

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.

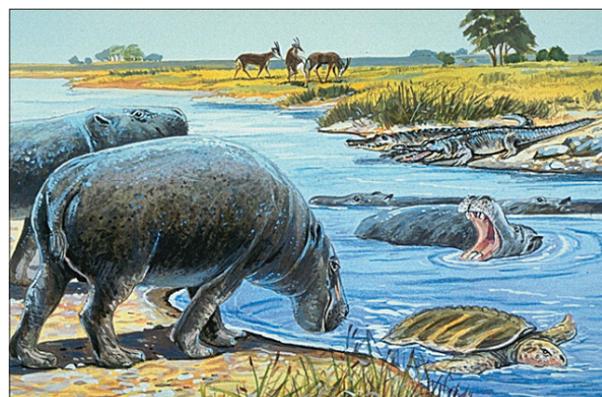
"It is of key importance to teach people about the environment here," he says.

"You don't know where you are today unless you know where you come from. It is important to know about the environment of this country because environmental change go in cycles," 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?"

"The Holy Quran talks about how the earth was created and how things go in cycles.

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



Hippos, turtles, antelopes and crocodiles

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