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Japanese Scientists Begin Work on Possible Mammoth Clone

Japanese scientists are starting work on prehistoric DNA samples for what may become an attempt to clone a woolly mammoth.



17/07/2003 02:43
VOA

Scientists in Japan are hopeful the long extinct woolly mammoth, a relative of today's elephant, may return to roam the earth once again. Geneticists from several different Japanese universities have started to analyze tissue samples taken from a 20,000-year-old woolly mammoth carcass unearthed in the

frozen Siberian tundra last August.

It may take years to bring the prehistoric beast to life through cloning - if it is possible at all. But the time factor and the uncertainty of success have not deterred the enthusiasm of one scientist who spoke to VOA on Wednesday.

"We want to know exactly [whether the] content of the DNA is mammoth," said Dr. Yoshihiko Hosoi, a professor of genetics at Kinki University in Wakayama prefecture, where some of the samples are being analyzed. "We are the department of genetic engineering, so our focus [is] on the DNA itself. So probably [to] clone a mammoth is like our dream, I think."

In the meantime, Dr. Hosoi says team leader Akira Irytani, also of Kinki University, will start work on sequencing the genetic material from the animal, determining its genetic make-up.

Once the genome has been completed scientists can tell if the extinct beast is closely related to modern-day elephants. If so, they may use an elephant to try to incubate a cloned mammoth.

Woolly mammoths lived during the Pleistocene Era, or Ice Age. Fossil remains of the animals have been found across the North American and Eurasian continents.

Dr. Hosoi says the mammoth's genetic material is also of scientific interest for other reasons.

For example, scientists may find clues as to why the massive beasts became extinct. They might also learn why modern-day elephants, unlike the mammoths, are adapted to live in tropical climates.

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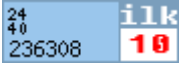
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