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Chris Sweeney/Medill The reconstructed skull of SuperCroc sits on top of filing cabinets in paleontologist Paul Sereno's fossil lab at the University of Chicago.

SuperCroc consumes crowd of science writers

BY CHRISTOPHER B SWEENEY AND TOWN TRAVIS APRIL 22, 2008

In a dusty basement at the University of Chicago, the near perfect 6-foot skull of SuperCroc stares eerily at you through hollow eye sockets the size of grapefruits.

The reptile was discovered in Africa by paleontologist Paul Sereno.

SuperCroc, scientifically known as Sarcosuchus imperator ("flesh crocodile emperor"), lived about 110 million years ago in the Sahara Desert of Africa. Stretching nearly 40 feet long and weighing up to 10 tons, it feasted on dinosaurs and other large prey. The extinct predator was an impressive find for Sereno and his team, but he isn't satisfied.

"I want the brain of SuperCroc," Sereno said, standing over the imposing artifact. "The brain of a 40-foot crocodile." The world doesn't hold such a brain any longer but Sereno wants to understand how the animal thought and functioned. To do that, he plans to send the skull to a lab for scanning.

Sereno opened his fossil lab Thursday to about 20 members of the Chicago chapter of the National Association of Science Writers to showcase his latest finds and discuss his future plans.

"There has been a tremendous advance in [Sereno's work]," said chapter member Gary Von Euer, an author of science textbooks. He said he has followed Sereno's work since he first heard him speak 10 years ago.

"This really has to get more funding," Von Euer said, in regards to the fossil lab's tight quarters. The lab takes up two floors in a utilitarian building that houses the Department of Geophysical Sciences. Fossils are scattered around on tables, desks and filing cabinets. The cramped quarters have forced Sereno to keep many of his finds in storage near O'Hare International Airport.

Sereno led the tour through his labs, beginning by opening drawers filled with rare fossils dating back millions of years. As he described his adventures hunting fossils across six continents, he discussed the importance and difficulties of coming up with the right name for newly discovered dinosaurs. The name must be both scientifically and culturally appropriate, he said.

One example was when Sereno initially wanted to name a discovery he made in India after Shiva, the Hindu deity associated with war and destruction. After consulting with Indian scholars, Sereno understood the social, cultural and political tensions he would have created by using Shiva in the name.

The second room on the tour housed a cube of rock imbedded with fossilized Tyrannosaurus Rex bones. Sereno discovered the nearly 5,000-pound fossil of the predator on an expedition in Wyoming a few years back. The removal process proved to be very difficult because of the fossil's dimensions and fragility, he said. So it was left encased in its cubic tomb of earth, unlike most fossils that are extracted from rocks in partial form and then reconstructed.

A smaller piece of fossil that is separated from the bulk shows the T-Rex's stomach ribs, which led Sereno to the discovery.

Sereno spoke enthusiastically about his discoveries and fielded questions about what the world was like millions of years ago when his dinosaurs were alive.

"I've always been interested in the past and how things develop," said Bruce Dixon, a medical writer who came to the event.

Julie Grisham, a freelancer in the Chicago area who writes mainly on cancer research, said Sereno's presentation offered a complete departure from her day-to-day experiences.

Sereno captivated the audience by mixing tales from the field with his own honest insight about his humble beginnings as a paleontologist.

"I never thought I would be a dinosaur hunter," said Sereno, who describes his work as a combination of geology, biology and art. He has brought back more than 100 tons of material from Africa. He emphasized the importance of taking discoveries back to their native country. "I do have plans to build a museum in Africa," Sereno said, pinpointing Niger for the location.

Although Sereno loves working on-site, he doesn't downplay the importance of the tedious lab work that comes with each new discovery.

"If you are getting close and you go under the microscope, it's a whole different world," Sereno said.



Chris Sweeney/Medill The actual fossilized skull of a SuperCroc takes up an entire table in Sereno's lab.



Chris Sweeney/Medill Paul Sereno shows off the stomach ribs of his T-Rex.

Related Links

- Explore Paul Sereno's fossil expeditions
- The World of SuperCroc