



Geologist Keller debunks extinction theory

Does a single earth impact theory explain the extinction of the dinosaurs?

BY JIM HALL

This year, Hollywood has twice put our species in danger of mass extinction. *Deep Impact* and the more recent blockbuster *Armageddon* have pitted humanity against the terror of an impact event capable of destroying it.

As most Hollywood films, the plot is not an original concept. Its origins, in fact, lie in the fossilized past with the dinosaurs. The dinosaurs died out due to a single-impact event.

Or at least that is what the media has proposed.

Dr. Gerta Keller, professor of Geology at Princeton University is sceptical. Keller has recently returned from a sabbatical in South America. She brought back some empirical evidence from the site of the impact crater in South America that contradicts a single-impact theory.

The reason she is sceptical of the single-impact theory is that it has been shown that the impact (roughly 100 miles in diameter) would not have been large enough to arrange a mass extinction of this scale — several impacts would have had to have taken place, and this argument is asserted.

"It is unlikely that there were

several of these impacts [of asteroids hitting the Earth at exactly this point in pre-history]. There exists no solid evidence for such a theory," Keller said. "It is much more likely that there were multiple-kill effects."

Perhaps that most important is the theory of volcanism as a weapon of mass extinction.

"Within the K-T strip, we have found iridium deposits, which is definitely evidence of volcanic activity during this point in history," Keller said.

K-T strips refer to the layer of ash found on the Earth's crust that is believed to date back to this point in history. It is believed to be the fallout from an impact event.

Keller has a new theory — because iridium has been found in this deposit, volcanism probably has had as much or more to do with mass extinction than a single event.

"This means that volcanism is a probable culprit," Keller said.

Many scientists believe that we are living in an ice age even now, and that the temperate climate we presently enjoy is simply due to global warming. The same may have been true of the dinosaurs during their last 40,000 years of existence. Keller lists this as another possible factor in the

extinction of the dinosaurs.

"There is evidence of a drastic warming effect during the period in question," Keller said.

This evidence exists in fossilized plankton found on the ocean floor, through which sudden changes in climate can be observed. Global warming is important to the

theories of mass extinction. If the climate did in fact warm rapidly, those animals adapted to cooler environments would be in danger of extinction.

Unfortunately, scientists do not have all of the information needed to take the guessing out of this geological question. There is,

for instance, the unknown date of the South American impact creator. Scientists also cannot fully explain why there is more than one ash deposit line found in between certain chalk layers in Mexico (although this would also seem to suggest multiple volcanic eruptions).



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