

Each year, hundreds of people from Canada and abroad offer to help find new fossils. Last summer, there were 36 volunteers from Canada, the United States, Norway and Nepal working with the professionals. Their enthusiasm was crucial, for they did much of the necessary and time-consuming spade-work. As Strong-Watson points out, "Although it appears you are just sitting scraping away dirt from a single bone, you're learning the entire time. People find it relaxing and they find it very educational."

Popular theories on the disappearance of the dinosaurs are many and varied, but the Alberta digs are helping to answer the question more definitively. While some hold that a catastrophic event such as a meteor colliding with the earth caused their extinction, others contend that a slew of volcanic eruptions wiped them out. It seems more likely, however, that it was neither of these possibilities.

Indeed, Pat Lee, among other paleontologists at the Tyrell Museum, believes that the dinosaur population decreased gradually over several million years, due to changing vegetation and climatic conditions. This theory is supported by findings in Alberta: there have been 35 species of dinosaurs found that date back to between 68 and 72 million years ago; a substantially smaller number of species (found further north) date back to between 65 and 68 million years ago; and very few species (still further north) date back to 64 million years ago — the cut-off point when the last of the dinosaurs lived.

Although the story of the dinosaurs is by no means complete, paleontological studies in Alberta are making great strides in advancing humankind's understanding of the mighty prehistoric creatures.

In Search of Ancient Secrets: Canada and China Join Forces to Unearth Dinosaur Fossils

The Canada-China Dinosaur Project is the most ambitious international joint program ever undertaken in the field of dinosaur paleontology. It involves four years of field work in China's Gobi Desert, the western Canadian province of Alberta and the Canadian Arctic by scientists from both countries. Prepared and mounted for display, the skeletons recovered will form a touring exhibit that will visit more than a dozen museums in nine countries in Europe, North America and the Pacific Rim for another four years beginning in 1991. Indeed, the Dinosaur Project is a wonderful adventure in co-operative exploration of earth history.

At various times between 65 and 100 million years ago, ancient North America and Asia were connected as one big landmass. Roaming across this immense territory were the gargantuan animals that have come to be known as the dinosaurs.

While many of the dinosaur fossils found in North America and Asia are remarkably similar, still others are radically different. Indeed, one of the great challenges of modern science is to understand the series of developments that led to these similarities and differences, and to thereby reveal the nature of the ancient biological ties between East and West.

With the Dinosaur Project, leading paleontologists from Canada and China are now in the process of filling in some of the fossil record gaps. In

fact the project is shedding new light on how dinosaurs evolved, how species from Asia and North America were inter-related, and whether certain species migrated from one continent to the other.

Initiated and co-ordinated by Edmonton's Ex Terra Foundation, the Dinosaur Project has three core partners: the Alberta government's Tyrell Museum of Paleontology, Canada's National Museum of Natural Sciences and the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology (IVPP) of the Chinese Academy of Science (Academia Sinica).

Canada's two leading dinosaur paleontologists, Dr. Phillip Currie of the Tyrell Museum and Dr. Dale Russell of the National Museum of Natural Sciences, and China's leading dinosaur paleontologist, Dr. Dong Zhiming of the IVPP, are directing the project's scientific activities.

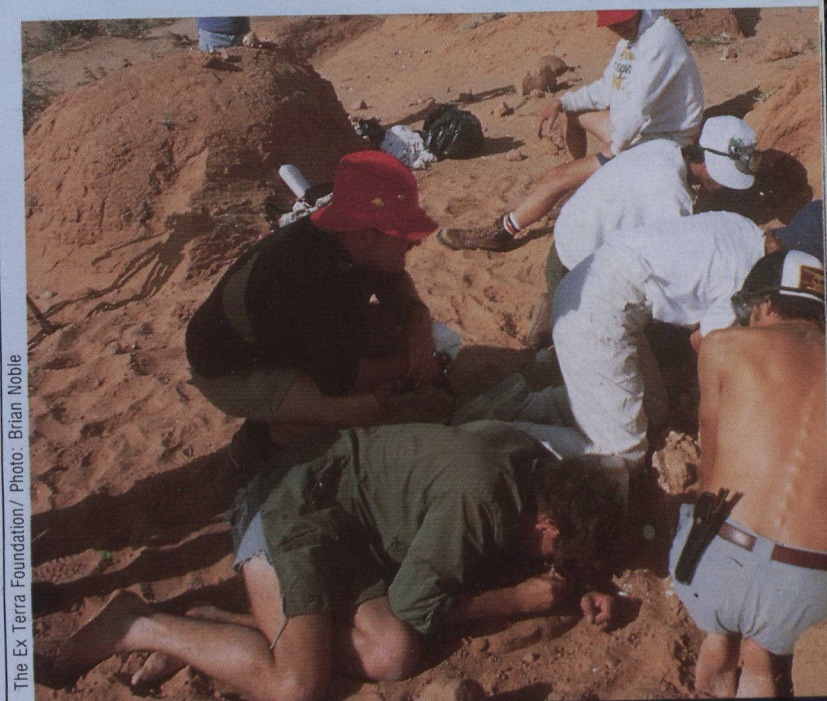
The joint efforts of scholars and experts from both China and Canada have thus far resulted in a highly success-

ful project. Last summer's discoveries, announced in Beijing in August, made headlines in the (Chinese) *People's Daily*, the *New York Times* and almost every major newspaper in between. The publicity confirms what the expedition's organizers already knew: the world is fascinated by dinosaurs.

Says Brian Noble, founding executive-director of the Ex Terra Foundation who has worked on the project for seven years, "Dinosaurs make people reflect, they make their minds wonder. It's universal. It doesn't matter if you're Canadian, Russian, Chinese, Mongolian, French or British. . . . Dinosaurs . . . bring people and ideas together."

The Dinosaur Project has certainly succeeded in bringing the people of Canada and China together. It has also succeeded in shedding further light on the life and times of the mighty creatures that dominated the planet for more than 140 million years.

Leading paleontologists from Canada and China hope to shed more light on dinosaur habits and travels.



The Ex Terra Foundation/ Photo: Brian Noble