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125,000 YEAR OLD BEAVER DAM UNEARTHED NEAR OLD CROW

WHITEHORSE – A palaeontological survey in the Old Crow Basin has unearthed the probable remains of a 125,000 year old beaver dam, the first ever fossilized artefact of its kind, announced Tourism and Culture Minister Elaine Taylor and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Chief Joe Linklater.

“The work, supported by land claims funding, was conducted on Vuntut Gwitchin settlement land and was part of a larger survey of ancient mammal fossils along the Porcupine and Old Crow Rivers,” Taylor said.

The survey was conducted by Paul Matheus, a Yukon government palaeontologist, Natalia Rybczynski, an expert on fossil beavers at the Canadian Museum of Nature, and Keith Rispin, a student assistant from Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation.

“Our palaeontological resources provide a wealth of information about past times,” Linklater said. “It is a positive experience for everyone to be part of this interesting research program in the north Yukon. We look forward to continue working with Dr. Matheus to discover more about these fascinating finds.”

It appears that many of the sticks in the beaver dam were cut by beavers but it was unclear to the survey team if any were cut by the extinct giant beaver that lived 90,000 years ago. Palaeontologists are studying the wood to make that determination.

“Giant beavers were not ancestors of modern beavers,” Matheus said. “It is still uncertain to what extent they actually cut and processed wood. The best leads for future research into this question lie in the Yukon’s fossil record, particularly the Old Crow region.”

At a separate site on the Porcupine River downstream from Old Crow, the team also unearthed additional beaver-cut sticks in sediment which might date back as far as 3-5 million years. It is possible that this particular find represents the oldest beaver-cut wood in the world.

“Once the associated volcanic ash at the site is dated,” Matheus said, “we’ll be better able to determine the age of the wood, but it could be as old as or older than the beaver pond site on Ellesmere Island.”

Future work at both sites will include site visits collecting fossils, educational programs such as student research, and public presentations by palaeontologists and other collaborating scientists.

“The beaver is Canada’s national symbol,” Taylor said. “This is a wonderful discovery for the Yukon and for all Canadians.”

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Attachment: Pleistocene-age beaver dam photos

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ATTACHMENT – TWO BEAVER DAM PHOTOS



Ancient Beaver Dam.

Paleontologists from the Government of Yukon and the Canadian Museum of Nature have discovered what appears to be a fossil beaver dam in northern Yukon. They estimate it to be 125,000 years old, placing it in the late Pleistocene epoch. While it is not unheard of to find Pleistocene-age wood cut by beavers, this is the first intact fossil beaver dam ever to be reported. The finding will help scientists answer questions about beavers' behaviours, the antiquity of beaver dam construction techniques, and environmental conditions of the Pleistocene epoch.

(photo by Natalia Rybczynski, Canadian Museum of Nature).



Mammoth bones found at base of beaver dam.

Two woolly mammoth foot bones were found in the base of the beaver dam. Modern beavers will place stones in the base of dams to help anchor them. Paleontologists are wondering if these Pleistocene beavers used bones instead of stones to build the dam because stones are generally absent from the area.

(Government of Yukon photo).