

## **Researchers take another step in bringing back a wooly mammoth**

March 23 2015, by Bob Yirka



Model at the Royal BC Museum. Credit: Wikipedia

(Phys.org)—A team of researchers working at Harvard University has taken yet another step towards bringing to life a reasonable facsimile of a woolly mammoth—a large, hairy elephant-like beast that went extinct approximately 3,300 years ago. The work by the team has not been published as yet, because as team lead George Church told *The Sunday Times*, recently, they believe they have more work to do before they



write up their results.

Church is quick to point out that his team is not cloning the <u>mammoth</u>, instead they are rebuilding the genome of the ancient animal by studying its DNA, replicating it and then inserting the copy into the genome of an Asian elephant—the closest modern day equivalent. They are not bringing forth a new mammoth yet either—all of their work is confined to simple cells in their lab. What they have done, however, is build healthy living elephant cells with mammoth DNA in them. Their work is yet another step towards that ultimate goal, realizing the birth of a wooly mammoth that is as faithful to the original as is humanly possible.

Talk of cloning a mammoth began not long after scientists learned how to actually do cloning—mammoth carcasses have been found in very cold places which preserved remains, which of course, included DNA. But not everyone has been onboard with the idea—some claim it is stepping into God's territory, others suggest it seems ridiculous considering all of the species that are nearing extinction, including those of elephants. Why not use those financial resources that are now going towards bringing back something that has gone extinct, to saving those that are still here?

The technique the team is using is called Crispr, it allows for reproducing exact copies of genes—in this case 14 mammoth genes, which are then inserted into elephant genes. As Church explains, the team prioritizes which genes are replicated and inserted, based on such factors as hairiness, ear size, and <u>subcutaneous fat</u>, which the animal needed to survive in its harsh cold environment.

Not clear as yet is when or if the team at Harvard has plans to produce an actual living mammoth, or if they will leave that to other teams working on similar projects.



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