

Giant prehistoric marsupial found in Northern Australia

July 5 2011, by Bob Yirka



Diprotodon optatum - giant marsupial from Pleistocene of Australia. Image: Dmitry Bogdanov/Wikipedia.

(PhysOrg.com) -- In what paleontologists are describing as a major find, researchers have dug up the remains of a creature that lived some 50,000 to two million years ago. The diprotodon (*Diprotodon optatum*) as it's known, has been described as somewhat akin to a giant wombat, and is a marsupial, meaning it carried its young in a pouch the way kangaroos do. And while other bones from diprotodon have been previously discovered in many other parts of Australia, this is the first complete skeleton, and its discovery will allow scientists to more accurately see what the animal actually looked like.

The excavation team, comprised of students and researchers from several Australian colleges and universities and led by project leader Professor Michael Archer of the University of New South Wales, has

shipped the find to Mount Isa for further study. The [skeleton](#) was found in north-west Queensland's Gulf of Carpentaria region, and was first noted last year when a group unearthed a large leg bone, unaware of the rest of the skeleton buried nearby. It was only when they returned this year to investigate further did they find the rest of the skeleton. After further study and preparation at the Riversleigh Fossil Center, the skeleton will be put on display at the Queensland Museum.

Researchers are excited about the find because they believe it will help to fill in missing information about not just the diprotodon, but about early Aboriginal culture as the two are believed to have co-existed; and indeed one rib found at another site had a small square hole through it that many believe came about as the result of a spear strike.



Artist illustration of northern Australia in Pleistocene times, with diprotodon in foreground. Artwork: Dorothy Dunphy

The diprotodon, described as an SUV sized wombat, is believed to be the largest marsupial ever to have walked the earth, weighing in at some three tonnes (3000 kilograms) and stretching to 14 feet long (4.3 meters). A herbivore, the giant beast would have presented a challenge to early predatory humans nonetheless if was anything like a wombat, which has sharp rodent-like teeth and has been known to bite, charge and bowl over those that cause it alarm.

Because all of the bones were found together, the research team believes many more specimens, including those of other mega fauna, might be found in the area as well.

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