Study shows flowers powered the woolly mammoth
11 February 2014

The University of Copenhagen's Eske Willerslev led an international team of scientists who studied both ancient plant DNA trapped in the permafrost and the stomach contents of frozen, mummified mammoth carcasses to look at vegetation changes dating back 50,000. They found forbs dominated plant fauna until around 10,000 years ago—the time at which many megafauna became extinct—before giving way to woody plants as the Arctic warmed at the end of the Pleistocene.

Froese said the results show large animals like the mammoth were eating a more diverse diet than previously thought, with forbs serving as a staple. Until now, scientists believed grasses were the main food source for these mammals, largely because these plants produce so much pollen which has been so well preserved in the geologic record, he said.

These latest results paint a clearer picture about life on the "Mammoth Steppe," Froese added, but there's still more scientific detective work to be done.

"We still have much to learn about this Lost World of the Arctic," Froese said. "We now know a little more about how these animals likely sustained themselves, but we still have more to learn about what ultimately led to their extinction."
