

Scientists discover ancient croc that could chew

科學家發現遠古鱷魚會咀嚼



Scientists have announced the discovery of an ancient, mammal-like crocodile that knew how to chew, something its modern gash-and-gulp cousins can't do.

The 100-million-year-old reptile, unearthed in Tanzania, was about the size of a domesticated cat and more at home on land than in water.

It had an unusually lean profile, a flexible backbone and relatively little scaly armor around its **midriff**, the better to leap in the air to grab giant dragonflies and other **airborne** prey.

But the most biting distinctive feature of *Pakasuchus kapilimai*, the researchers said, was its choppers.

It shared the overhanging, fang-like canines that today's alligators and crocodiles use to rip into their victims' flesh before swallowing them more-or-less whole.

But it also had specialized teeth that looked suspiciously like the molars once thought to be unique to our distant warm-blooded **ancestors**.

"At first glance, this croc is trying very hard to be a mammal," **quipped** Patrick O'Connor, a professor at Ohio University in Athens and lead author of the study, published in *Nature*.

"A number of characteristics of this new species are very similar to features that were critical during the course of mammalian evolution from the Mesozoic into the Cenozoic," which began 65 million years ago, he said in a statement.

The discovery adds to a growing body of evidence suggesting that crocodiles were once far more diverse than they are today in body type, habitat and appetites.

O'Connor and colleagues found a complete skeleton of *Pakasuchus* in Tanzania's Rukwa Rift Basin in 2008, and have also recovered portions of seven different individuals. (AFP)

科學家宣布發現一種類似哺乳類的遠古鱷魚具有咀嚼能力，這是牠們只會大咬一口吞下的現代鱷魚表親無法做到的。

這種存在於一億年前的爬蟲類，是在坦尚尼亞被人發現。體型跟家貓差不多大，喜歡陸地多於水中的生活。

這種動物的體型特別瘦，有個柔軟的脊椎，腹部還有相對較小的鱗片，方便牠跳到空中抓住大蜻蜓和其他空中獵物。

研究人員表示，這種叫做「貓鱷」的動物最厲害的特徵，就是牠的尖牙。

牠和現代短吻鱷跟鱷魚一樣有著類似犬齒的鋒利尖牙，可以在一口吞下獵物前加以撕咬。

但牠又有類似臼齒（一度被認為只有人類溫血遠祖才有）的特殊牙齒。

俄亥俄大學雅典校區教授，也是《自然雜誌》刊文的主要作者派粹克·歐康納諷刺地說：「乍看之下，這貓鱷很努力的想成為哺乳類。」

他透過聲明表示：「這個新物種的許多特徵都跟六千五百萬年前中生代到新生代間，哺乳類演化的過程非常相似。」

這項發現提供更多證據顯示，以往鱷魚的體型、棲息地與食物

比起現在要多元許多。

歐康納跟同事二〇〇八年時曾在坦尚尼亞的魯塔裂谷發現一副完整的貓鱷骨骼，及其他七隻貓鱷的部分化石。

(法新社／翻譯：吳岱瑋)

Top: This handout photo released by the National Science Foundation shows the left-lateral view of the skull of *Pakasuchus kapilimai* within its original red sandstone matrix.

PHOTO: AFP/JOHN SATTLER/NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

Below: An artist's impression released by the National Science Foundation shows in the main frame an ancient crocodile, *Pakasuchus kapilimai*, that roamed Tanzania during the Middle Cretaceous.

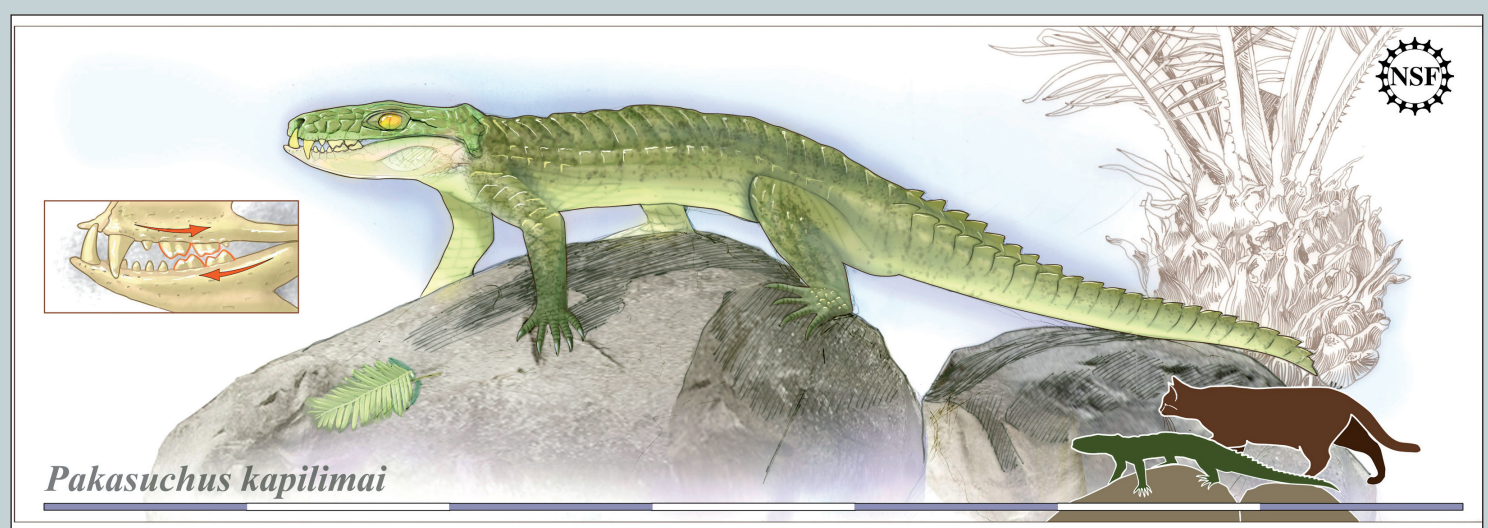
PHOTO: AFP/ZINA DERETSKY/NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

上圖：這張國家科學基金會公布的照片中，是遺嵌著紅色砂岩的貓鱷頭顱左側面。

照片：法新社／約翰·沙德勒／國家科學基金會

下圖：這張國家科學基金會所公布，由藝術家描繪的圖照中，是白堊紀中期活躍於坦尚尼亞的貓鱷的主要骨架。

照片：法新社／席娜·德芮斯基／國家科學基金會



TODAY'S WORDS

今日單字

1. **midriff** /'mɪdrɪf/ n.

腹部 (fū4 bu4)

例: The cricket ball hit Chris directly in the midriff.
(板球直接打到克里斯的腹部。)

2. **airborne** /'ɛr,bɔːrn/ adj.

空中的 (kōng1 zhōng1 de5)

例: The vintage plane finally got airborne.
(那老式飛機終於升空了。)

3. **ancestor** /'ænsəstə-/ n.

祖先 (zu3 xian1)

例: Mike's ancestors came from eastern Europe.
(麥克的祖先來自東歐。)

4. **quip** /kwɪp/ v./n.

諷刺 (fēng4 cì4)，妙語 (miào4 yǔ3)

例: The minister's quip was criticized by the media.
(部長的諷刺被媒體批評。)