

<https://www.indiatoday.in/science/story/indian-rhino-roamed-coimbatore-tamil-nadu-fragments-of-bone-reveal-fossil-archaeology-wildlife-2858888-2026-01-28>

Rhinos once roamed Western Ghats, 3500-year-old bone fragments reveal
Today, the one-horned rhinoceros is primarily confined to northern grasslands, with major populations in Assam's Kaziranga National Park and parts of Nepal. Conservation efforts have successfully increased the global population to over 4,000 individuals.

Archaeologists have uncovered significant evidence of the Indian one-horned rhinoceros in southern India, revealing that the species roamed a far broader area of the country than previously believed.

Bone fragments from the animal were found at the Molapalayam Neolithic site near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, dating back approximately 3,500 years.

REMARKABLE ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIND

During excavation seasons in 2021 and 2024, researchers recovered four bone fragments: two metacarpals and two carpal. The bone fragments were recovered from the foot of an Indian rhino.

The discovery was led by archaeologist V Selvakumar from Tamil University's Department of Maritime History and Maritime Archaeology. Selvakumar presented the findings at an international symposium on recent scientific studies in Tamil Nadu archaeology held in Madurai.

Radiocarbon dating places the site between 1600 BCE and 1400 BCE. The rhino remains were part of a larger faunal assemblage representing 28 animal species, including domesticated cattle, buffalo, goats, sheep, pigs, and dogs, as well as wild species such as nilgai, blackbuck, four-horned antelope, gazelle, chital, and sambar deer.

This marks only the third documented instance of Indian rhino bones in Tamil Nadu's prehistoric archaeological record, highlighting the species' presence in the region's ancient ecosystems.

EXPANDED RANGE OF THE RHINO

Today, the one-horned rhinoceros is primarily confined to northern grasslands, with major populations in Assam's Kaziranga National Park and parts of Nepal. Conservation efforts have successfully increased the global population to over 4,000 individuals.

However, palaeontological and historical records indicate that during the Late Pleistocene and Holocene periods, the species inhabited a much wider area, extending across northern India, into Southeast Asia, and southward into suitable habitats.

The Molapalayam discovery demonstrates that the foothills of the Western Ghats once featured expansive grasslands and marshy wetlands capable of supporting large grazers like rhinos.

Experts note that an adult rhino requires vast open areas for foraging, underscoring the scale and richness of the prehistoric landscape in what is now an industrial hub around Coimbatore.

WHY IT MATTERS

The find, shared by Tamil Nadu Additional Chief Secretary for Environment, Climate Change, and Forests Supriya Sahu, enriches our understanding of how ecosystems in the Western Ghats region have transformed over millennia.

It points towards a renewed consideration of habitat restoration initiatives and long-term conservation possibilities in southern India.

Such archaeological evidence serves as a reminder of the deep historical connections between human settlements and biodiversity, emphasising the need to protect remaining natural heritage amid modern development.