The hot arid desert of Kutch was once a humid sub-tropical forest with a variety of birds, freshwater fish and possibly giraffes and rhinos, a team of Indian and French researchers has said.

Their conclusions are based on the discovery of a tranche of vertebrate fossils from nearly 14 million years ago in a geological period known as the Miocene. After the discovery, they took nearly 12 years for analysis.

The fossils, consisting mostly of ribs, and parts of teeth and bones, were unearthed from Palasava village of Rapar taluk in Kutch, Gujarat. “Overall, the fossil finds from Palasava suggest that a rich diversity of fauna and flora sustained in warm, humid/wet, tropical to sub-tropical environmental conditions during the Middle Miocene (about 14 Mya),” the research team of Vivesh V. Kapur, Martin Pickford, Gaurav Chauhan and M.G. Thakkar reported in the peer-reviewed journal Historical Biology. The bulk of fossils unearthed in Kutch have so far been mainly marine organisms, due to their proximity to the Arabian Sea. Geological changes eventually closed off the salt-flats’ connection to the sea and the region turned into a large lake, eventually becoming salty wetlands.

The findings point to clues on how mammals dispersed between Africa and the Indian subcontinent when part of India was in the Gondwanaland supercontinent that existed nearly 300 million years ago. “It is surprising that Kutch had giraffes, rhinos, elephants and giant crocodiles in a closed basin in the Miocene,” M.G. Thakkar, a senior scientist at the K.S.K.V. Kachchh University told The Hindu. Palaeontologist G.V.R. Prasad of Delhi University said that the finds were significant because they showed Kutch to be a potential treasure trove of mammal fossils.

Fossils show Kutch desert was once a forest

‘It likely had giraffes, rhinos, elephants and giant crocodiles in the Miocene period’

JACOB KOSHY
NEW DELHI

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