

NET Television Segment on Mammoth Mystery Airs July 30 on NOVA scienceNOW

LINCOLN, Neb. (July 16, 2008) -- The tangled tusks of two Ice Age mammoths and the quest to unravel the mystery of their deaths is the focus of an NET Television-produced segment for the PBS series "NOVA scienceNOW," airing Wednesday, July 30, at 8 p.m. CT on NET1 and NET-HD.

During the summer of 1962 on a ranch in the Nebraska Badlands near Crawford, Neb., surveyor Ben Ferguson stumbled across some unusually large fossils. A crew of University of Nebraska paleontologists, including undergraduate student Mike Voorhies, was working nearby and was called to investigate. The scientists soon realized that Ferguson had found the remains of a pair of Ice Age mammoths.

"We dug forward and found ribs and there was a nice skull. That was really exciting. Another few days of digging revealed there were actually two complete mammoth skeletons with their tusks tangled up," said Voorhies, now retired and emeritus curator of vertebrate paleontology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln State Museum.

The mammoth fossils were from a species of prehistoric elephants that towered thirteen feet high, weighed up to ten tons and had 12-foot tusks. These titans roamed North America's grasslands 12,000 years ago. Despite their massive size, these mammoths were plant eaters and normally passive, according to Voorhies.

But these two animals had struggled to their deaths, their tusks locked and intertwined like a pair of twisted tree trunks with one tusk poking into the eye of the other. Voorhies said it appears the two male mammoths were so well matched for battle that neither one backed down. But why were they fighting? By looking inside the fossilized tusks, modern forensic science can read a record of the mammoths' final days that will finally put this mystery to rest.

Voorhies recruited University of Michigan professor and forensic paleontologist Dan Fisher to join the investigation. Fisher pioneered the study of mammoth tusks to detect age, nutrition and behavior of the mammoths. The clues give scientists a rare glimpse of animal behavior preserved in the fossil record.

The segment of NOVA scienceNOW follows Voorhies and Fisher as they try to solve this 12,000-year-old mystery and determine what ultimately led to the deaths of these two male mammoths. They reveal startling clues from the fossilized tusks and develop a theory about the final days of these mammoths that is tested at the scene of their deadly battle in the Nebraska Badlands.

NOVA scienceNOW is a fast-paced and provocative science program hosted by renowned astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. With a team of correspondents in the field, the show explores new developments in computer science, astronomy, engineering, medicine and other scientific fields.

NET1 and NET-HD are part of NET Television, a service of NET. For a complete program schedule, visit NET's Web site at netNebraska.org/television.

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NET Television:

NET1 is Nebraska's first public television broadcast service and includes PBS and award-winning, locally produced public television programming; **NET2** offers live coverage of the Nebraska Unicameral and other news, public affairs, history and science programs; **NET3** is a 24-hour channel featuring the most popular how-to, travel and lifestyle series; and **NET-HD** presents high-definition digital broadcast programming displayed in a wide-screen format.