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News Release

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Jurassic sea monster hailed as ‘crown jewel’ of Scottish fossils

A fierce predator that prowled the oceans 170 million years ago has today (5 September) been unveiled by scientists for the first time, half a century after it was discovered.

The fossilised skeleton of the dolphin-like animal – named the Storr Lochs Monster – was found on the Isle of Skye in 1966.

It is the most complete skeleton of a sea-living reptile from the Age of Dinosaurs that has ever been found in Scotland.

A partnership between the University of Edinburgh, National Museums Scotland and energy company SSE has enabled the fossil to be extracted from the rock that encased it for millions of years.

The ancient reptile was around four metres in length and had a long, pointed head filled with hundreds of cone-shaped teeth, which it used to feed on fish and squid, researchers say.

The fossil was discovered in 1966 on a beach near the SSE Storr Lochs Power Station by the facility’s manager, Norrie Gillies, who died in 2011 aged 93.

It has been preserved in National Museums Scotland’s storage facility for 50 years and now, by pooling expertise, the new collaboration will enable experts to form a clearer picture of the fossil.

A team of palaeontologists from the University of Edinburgh and National Museums Scotland will carry out a detailed examination of the fossil, which belongs to an extinct family of marine reptiles – known as ichthyosaurs. The ancient animals thrived in prehistoric seas at the same time the dinosaurs were ruling the land.

The discovery will help to reveal how ichthyosaurs evolved during the Middle Jurassic Period, a part of Earth’s history that has long been shrouded in mystery owing to a lack of fossil evidence from the time. The Isle of Skye is one of the few places in the world where fossils from the Middle Jurassic Period can be found.

Once analysis of the fossil is complete, the public will have the chance to view the fossil at a number of locations, including SSE’s new visitor centre at the Pitlochry Dam, which opens in a few months’ time.

Ranked among the top universities in the world

Dr Steve Brusatte, of the University of Edinburgh's School of GeoSciences, said:
"Ichthyosaurs like the Storr Lochs Monster ruled the waves while dinosaurs thundered across the land. Their bones are exceptionally rare in Scotland, which makes this specimen one of the crown jewels of Scottish fossils. It's all thanks to the keen eye of an amateur collector that this remarkable fossil was ever found in the first place, which goes to show that you don't need an advanced degree to make huge scientific discoveries."

Dr Nick Fraser, Keeper of Natural Sciences at National Museums Scotland, said: "The Storrs Loch Monster highlights the rich fossil heritage of Skye. Collaborations between scientists at National Museums Scotland, the University of Edinburgh and elsewhere in the UK are beginning to shed new light on the Middle Jurassic of Skye – a time when dinosaurs were dominant on land but mammals were also diversifying".

Martin Pibworth, Managing Director Wholesale SSE, said: "SSE is delighted to be playing its part in bringing the Storr Lochs Monster to life. The fossil was found 50 years ago by Norrie Gillies who, like his son Allan are both proud SSE company men, and were determined it should receive the public attention it deserves. SSE hopes this fossil will indeed prove to be a 'crown jewel' in Scotland's Jurassic history and thanks to the foresight of the Gillies family, enjoyed by generations to come."

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