

GIANT FLYING TURKEY ROAMED AUSTRALIA

SYDNEY: A giant, flying turkey as tall as a kangaroo once roamed Australia, paleontologists said yesterday, after an analysis of fossils and bones from around the country revealed five extinct bird species. A team from Flinders University in South Australia said they were all chunky relatives of today's malleefowl and brush-turkeys. The megapode birds lived during the Pleistocene era, between 1.6 million and 10,000 years ago, alongside oth-

er giant Australian animals like diprotodons, marsupial lions and short-faced kangaroos. Scientists had initially thought the fossils, first found in the 1880s, represented a single ancient bird, but fresh examination has led them to conclude they belong to five different species. Among them was a turkey weighing up to eight kilograms and standing taller than a grey kangaroo, which can reach 1.3 meters four times

the size of modern fowl. "These discoveries are quite remarkable because they tell us that more than half of Australia's megapodes went extinct during the Pleistocene, and we didn't even realize it until now," said researcher Elen Shute.

"We compared the fossils described in the 1880s and the 1970s with specimens discovered more recently and with the benefit of new fossils, differences between species became really clear." The

newly found birds fall into two categories "tall turkeys" that had long, slender legs and "nuggetty chickens" that had short legs and broad bodies. Unlike many large extinct birds, such as dodos, these megapodes were not flightless.

While big and bulky, their long, strong wing bones showed they could all fly, and probably roosted in trees, unlike their modern ground-dwelling cousins which build mounds to incu-

bate their eggs. Two of the new species come from the Thylacoleo Caves beneath Australia's vast Nullarbor Plain, which have proved a treasure trove since they were discovered 15 years ago. "So far the Thylacoleo Caves have yielded seven new species of kangaroo, a frog, two giant ground-cuckoos, and now two new megapodes," said Flinders professor Gavin Prideaux. "The closer we look, the more we keep finding."—AFP

SCIENTISTS DEVELOP TANNING DRUG FOR THE PALE-SKINNED

WASHINGTON: After 10 years of research, scientists have come up with a drug that could help people tan without exposure to the sun, potentially reducing the risk of skin cancer. The drug stimulates cells that produce the pigment that absorbs ultraviolet light, the researchers said in the US journal Cell Reports published. They stressed that further tests are needed to safeguard against potential side-effects in humans. Applied as a cream to the skin, the drug allowed red-haired mice to develop a deep tan.

Like their pale-skinned human counterparts, the mice are particularly susceptible to the damaging effects of the sun's ultraviolet rays. The original breakthrough in mice was announced more than a decade ago, in a study published in the British journal Nature in 2006. But it has taken scientists that much time to work out how to make much thicker human skin absorb the substance. The initial report revealed that a substance called forskolin gave red-haired mice a deep tan without exposure to UV light. But because human skin is relatively hairless compared to animals', it has evolved to be much tougher in order to protect against heat, cold and other environmental factors and the topical substance could not penetrate it effectively.

"Human skin is a very good barrier and

is a formidable penetration challenge. Therefore, other topical approaches just did not work," said David Fisher, chief of dermatology at Massachusetts General Hospital, a professor of dermatology at Harvard Medical School, and one of the authors of the study. "But 10 years later, we have come up with a solution. It's a different class of compounds, that work by targeting a different enzyme that converges on the same pathway that leads to pigmentation," he said. The scientists tested the substance on samples of human skin kept in laboratories and found that it darkened in proportion to the dosage applied.

The tan lasted several days. In animal tests, red-haired mice became "almost jet black in a day or two with a strong enough dose," the researchers observed. When the dosage was removed, normal skin regeneration meant the color faded within a week or so. "We believe the potential importance of this work is towards a novel strategy for skin cancer prevention," Fisher said. "Skin is the most common organ in our bodies to be afflicted with cancer, and the majority of cases are thought to be associated with UV radiation," he said. The long-term aim would be to create a cream that develops a tan without exposure to sunlight but which also absorbs harmful UV rays like traditional sun screens.—AFP

INDONESIA SEIZES PANGOLINS SCALES

MEDAN: Indonesian authorities have seized hundreds of critically endangered pangolins and scales in a haul worth \$190,000 after uncovering a major smuggling operation, an official said yesterday. Two men were also arrested after navy officers raided a warehouse near a port on Sumatra island late Tuesday, acting on a tip-off that it was being used to store the creatures which are also known as "scaly anteaters".

They discovered 223 live pangolins, 24 of the creatures which were already dead and frozen as well as nine large bags of pangolin scales, local navy spokesman Sahala Sinaga told. He said the total haul seized near the city of Medan, which was going to be sent to neighboring Malaysia, was worth an estimated 2.5 billion rupiah. It was further evidence that trade in the world's most heavily trafficked mammal remains a major problem despite concerted efforts to clamp down.

Last year, the reclusive, gentle mammal received the highest level of protection against illegal trade at a global conference in South Africa. Sinaga said the detained men, both 43, were suspected of being

small players in a larger syndicate. They could face up to five years in jail and a fine of 100 million rupiah if found guilty of breaking wildlife protection laws. "They claimed the pangolins would be shipped to Malaysia," said Sinaga, adding the scales could have been intended for use in the production of crystal methamphetamine. Pangolin scales are sometimes used in the production of the illegal drug.

The creature's meat is also prized as an edible delicacy and its body parts as an ingredient in traditional medicine in parts of Asia particularly China and Africa. It was just the latest case of pangolins being seized from alleged smugglers in Indonesia in August last year authorities found more than 650 pangolins hidden in freezers on the main island of Java and arrested a suspect. Protection group the International Union for Conservation of Nature classifies the pangolins found in Indonesia as critically endangered. Pangolins, which have bad vision but a good sense of smell and hearing, are covered in tough, overlapping scales, and eat ants using pink, sticky tongues almost as long as their bodies.—AFP



BOGOTA: Colombian doctor Alan Gonzalez, center, talks with acid attack survivors Angeles Borda, right, Luz Mendoza, left, and Silvia Juliano Jimenez in Bogota, Colombia.—AFP photos

COLOMBIAN PLASTIC SURGEON REBUILDS ACID VICTIMS' LIVES

'CHALLENGE TO GIVE THEM BACK THEIR HOPES, DREAMS'

BOGOTA: Angeles Borda ignored the cat calls as she walked past the building site. But she couldn't ignore the nitric acid that her tormentor then threw in her face. A decade on she is still disfigured. But help is at hand. In Colombia, said by authorities to be one of the countries, worst affected by acid attacks, a campaigning plastic surgeon is helping for free to rebuild victims' faces and lives. Borda, a 32-year-old mother of three, has had the ninth operation on her face at Alan Gonzalez's pristine surgical clinic. "I know that in a few months I will look better," she says. She has never been sure who was behind the attack, though an ex-boyfriend has been suspected.

Rebuilding faces

Previously used to treating soldiers wounded in conflict, Gonzalez, 46, has since 2010 specialized in helping women disfigured by acid. "Plastic surgery is not the surgery of vanity, but of life. The challenge is to give them back their hopes and dreams and above all, their smiles," he says. "We don't just rebuild faces, we rebuild lives." Official figures indicate that about 100 women get disfigured in acid attacks every year in Colombia, most of them in romantic disputes. The country last year passed a law specifically targeting such crimes. Struck by the "ignorance and intolerance" of such violence, Gonzalez helped set up Rebuilding Faces, an organization to help victims. Since late 2010 he has rebuilt the faces of 15 women in some 300 separate operations.

Reason to live

Victims typically contemplate suicide, Gonzalez says. On top of the trauma of the attack, they suffer discrimination and struggle to find work. Borda works selling sweets on buses. "I had two choices: sit there crying or go out and be seen the way I am," she says. "What happened to me is very sad, but it is possible to live with the consequences. I have dreams, I have goals, and I have the strength to move forward." Another patient, Luz Nidia Mendoza, 37, says she has not worked since suffering an acid attack in 2011.

She was blinded and is missing seeing her children grow up. "I hear them, I feel them and I touch them. But I cannot see them," she says. Like Borda she says she would have killed herself if it had not been for her children. "It is because of them that I am here." She has had 25 operations, with more yet to come, to rebuild her cheeks, forehead, mouth and nose. She is also hoping for a corneal transplant to be able to see again. "Doctor Alan is an angel for us. We owe him a lot," says Luz. "He gives us courage. He gives us joy."—AFP



BOGOTA: Angeles Borda, a 32-year-old acid attack survivor, is seen after her surgery with Dr. Alan Gonzalez, in Bogota, Colombia.

HK LAUNCHES IVORY BAN BILL

HONG KONG: Hong Kong launched a landmark bill to ban its ivory trade yesterday, describing it as an effort to "eradicate" the illegal poaching of elephants. The southern Chinese city is a major hub for ivory sales and announced last year that it would ban the import and export of the goods, but later clarified it would only completely abolish the trade by 2021. Critics say authorities are dragging their feet and lagging behind China, where officials in December pledged to halt the enterprise by the end of 2017.

A new amendment to the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants ordinance was presented to lawmakers yesterday, designed to toughen regulations and "phase out the local ivory trade," but said it would be a five-year process. Environment minister Wong Kam-sing said the city must respond to the demands of the international community as he formally introduced the bill at the legislative council yesterday. The trade would "fully come to a close" by 2021, he added.

A frontline park ranger from the Democratic Republic of Congo last week delivered emotional testimony to legislators, describing the violent nature of the trade.

Garamba National Park manager Erik Marav said he and his team were ambushed by poachers near an elephant carcass "with its face hacked off" last year, leading to the deaths of three rangers. He went on to argue that Hong Kong should not compensate its own ivory traders as it could further encourage the violent industry. Angry sellers in Hong Kong are demanding payback, claiming they have been unable to offload much of their remaining stock since the market diminished following an international ban nearly three decades ago.

The global trade in elephant ivory, with rare exceptions, has been outlawed since 1989 after populations of the African giants dropped from millions in the mid-20th century to around 600,000 by the end of the 1980s. There are now believed to be some 415,000. Lawmaker Regina Ip yesterday raised the question of compensation for traders, but Wong said the government would not buy up the ivory as the city was "determined" to close down the market. African ivory is highly sought after in China, where it is seen as a status symbol, and where elephant tusks are used in traditional medicine or to make ornaments.—AFP



INDONESIA: A forest ranger holds a pangolin confiscated from smugglers during a press conference in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia yesterday.—AP

AUSTRALIA BUILDS HUGE CAT-PROOF FENCE TO SAVE NATIVE ANIMALS

SYDNEY: Australia has begun constructing a huge cat-free zone in the desert so it can reintroduce native animals that have been pushed to the brink of extinction by the feral predator. Conservationists said work was underway on a fence in the country's harsh centre northwest of Alice Springs that will eventually enclose an area of 69,000 hectares with hundreds of feral cats trapped and culled. The project, run by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC), will reintroduce from islands and protected pockets of Australia at least 10 threatened species.

In some cases it will double populations that have dwindled to the hundreds. "Basically, anything that is a small-to-medium-sized mammal, particularly in inland and central Australia, has crashed dramatically," AWC chief executive Atticus Fleming told yesterday. "The early explorers, what they saw if they moved through the landscape was the Australian bush alive with small ani-

mals. "What feral cats and foxes, in particular, have done is robbed the country of our native wildlife so that much of inland central Australia is now a marsupial ghost town."

Feral cats, considered the main culprit behind Australia's high rate of mammal extinction, number in their millions across the country. Some kill up to seven animals every night. They have wiped out populations since being introduced by Europeans who settled Australia two centuries ago. Up to 400 will be killed "humanely" after the first phase of fencing is completed early next year, with the first lot of endangered animals, including the numbat a banded ant-eater and the black-footed rock-wallaby, reintegrated in 2019. Other animals to be given a new home include the western quoll (a carnivorous marsupial), the brush-tailed bettong (sometimes known as rat-kangaroos) and the bilby (rabbit-bandicoots).—AFP