

Study: Big animals' extinction forever alters environment

By Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle

Extinctions of large animals – a fate that could soon befall elephants and rhinoceroses – have a cascade effect on local ecosystems, including Northern California, where many smaller animals and plants died off after mammoths were wiped out, a team of scientists has discovered.

The size of elephants, wildebeests and other big plant-eaters makes them not only impressive and fascinating but also vital to the many species that live with and depend on them, according to a joint report by UC Berkeley, Stanford University, CSU Sacramento and the University of Chile.

“Ecological studies have shown that if you pull out a top predator or a key herbivore today, you get dramatic change in the ecosystem,” said Anthony Barnosky, a UC Berkeley professor of integrative biology and the study leader. “Our study makes it clear that in the past, such changes have lasted for thousands of years. These extinctions really do permanently change the dynamics. You can’t go back.”

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