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SCIENCE NEWS



**Prehistoric Bugs Also Fell Victim
to Impact**

February 25, 2002 8:10 CDT

The time is some 65-million years ago. A 6-mile wide asteroid is hurtling towards planet Earth. We already know it's a bad day for the planet; a horrid day to be a dinosaur, and your chances frankly aren't so good if you're any animal larger than a cat. Plants won't fare well either. But, what are your chances of surviving if you're a bug?

With all we know about extinction of larger species, we really know very little about how the asteroid impact affected insects. Tiny in the present tense, they aren't too well known for leaving behind lots of fossils after they die.

Scientists working at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science and the Denver Smithsonian Institute have found a way to trace their tracks, though. They may not have the bugs themselves to analyze, but they can follow their final footsteps-literally-by examining their trails and traces in the leaves and plants they were feasting on when they died. The paleontologists found that by examining the excellent supply of leaf fossils that they actually had lots of information on insects at their fingertips already.

By comparing insect damage on the leaves both before and after the extinction of the dinosaurs, they could make some very good educated guesses about who survived the asteroid's impact and who did not. Kirk Johnson and his colleagues estimate that between 55 and 60 percent of plant-eating insects were obliterated in the aftermath and impact of the asteroid, as reported in the current Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Some of the leaves that Johnson and his colleagues had to examine

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and study were up to four feet long, and incredibly detailed-down to the veins on the leaves. Also there for their perusal were diagnostic chomp marks, tunnels and holes left by prehistoric beetles, grasshoppers, butterflies and moths. What they found confirmed what our mothers have been telling us for years: being a picky eater is bad for your health and limits your prospects for the future.

Insects are divided up into generalists, or those who are content to feed on several different kinds of plant life, and specialists who knew what they liked and ate that and nothing else. In trying to survive life after the asteroid, the former fared much better than did the latter.

It appears from looking at the data that the generalists adapted nicely to their new life, while about 70 percent of the specialists died when their food source did. So it turns out that variety in eating habits, as in life, is the stuff that long life and happiness are made of. Who knew?

Source: Denver Museum of Nature & Science


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