

Hunt for the lost crocs of the Pharaohs

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Student Tara Shine told yesterday how she became a real-life Indiana Jones when she went hunting a “lost” colony of crocodiles, thought to have died out when the pharaohs disappeared.

The intrepid 28-year-old tracked down the elusive reptiles in the remote African country of Mauritania, where experts said they could not exist. Previously unknown except by local tribespeople, the creatures live in burrows and caves throughout the dry season and periods of drought.

Natives had been protecting the crocodiles for centuries, as superstition says their extinction would lead to already scarce water supplies completely drying up. PhD student Tara built her own “tank-cam” to find out where the crocs survive the desert drought and brought back remarkable images of the reptiles living underground in the middle of a desert.

Now, her two-and-a-half year mission will be told later this month in *The Pharaohs’ Lost Crocodiles*, a documentary commissioned by the BBC’s Bristol-based Natural History Unit.

Crocodiles once inhabited the whole of North Africa from Mauritania to Egypt and were worshipped by the pharaohs.

But with the encroachment of the desert and the pharaohs’ demise, there were thought to be no breeding populations of the Nile crocodile throughout the Sahara – until Tara made her astonishing discovery.

The film transports viewers 3000 years back to a time when giant crocodiles roamed through the temple grounds of the legendary city of Crocodilopolis, where they were hand fed by priests. DNA analysis has showed the Mauritanian crocodiles share the same ancient bloodline as the pharaohs’ sacred beasts, although they may now be a new species in their own right.

Tara, who is from Northern Ireland, said: “When I first went to Mauritania, the local people told me about the crocodiles that lived in the small rock pools and caves. Initially I didn’t believe them, as it seemed impossible – and there had never been any record of crocodiles in this part of the country.

“But when I went in search for the animals myself, I realised that what they were saying was true.” The crocodiles are up to seven feet in length and lack the aggressive behaviour of their river dwelling cousins.

They also migrate in search of water, a behaviour never reported in any other crocodile.

Tara added: “I was delighted to discover the crocodiles after days of searching for them under rocks.

“I didn’t realise exactly how important my find was until a team of top reptile specialists from the Koenig museum in Bonn came out to look at the crocodiles.” Tara said there was a complete lack of fear of the crocodiles among the local people.

“They even swim and wade with them. There are no stories of attacks, even in times of duress,” she said.

Tara’s discoveries have astonished the experts. Adam Britton, a crocodile expert at Australia’s Wildlife Management International, said: “The Sahara desert is definitely a surprising location to find a crocodile.

“The fact they can survive at all is testament to their remarkable ability to adapt to relatively hostile conditions.”