

Kushiro Tapir

The tapir is a large, herbivorous mammal resembling a pig, but with an elongated, prehensile snout. The four known extant species of tapir, all endangered, are found in South America, Central America, and Southeast Asia. Millions of years ago, several now-extinct species of tapir roamed North America and Eurasia.

This fossil is the upper jaw of a newly discovered species, the Kushiro tapir (*Colodon kushiroensis*). Paleontologists believe the Kushiro tapir lived around 38 million years ago, based on the geological strata in which the fossil was found.

Ice age migration

The fossilized molar teeth of the Kushiro tapir are similar to those found in tapir fossils from North America, leading paleontologists to conclude that the Kushiro tapir likely came to Hokkaido from North America via the Eurasian continent. During the last ice age, when sea levels were much lower, Hokkaido was connected by land to Eurasia via the island of Sakhalin.

A rare discovery

This fossil is unusual both because it is the only known remnant of a Kushiro tapir and because fossils of this size are rarely found intact. The specimen is 10 centimeters long and 9 centimeters wide, with nine teeth, including the premolar and molar teeth. It was discovered by junior high school students in 1968 near a cliff in Tomachise, to the east of Kushiro.