

Vital fossil pilfered from site next to road

Please return our dinosaur femur, scientists urge thief

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TWO SCIENTISTS are hoping that a thief will return a dinosaur fossil so that they will be able to determine whether they have discovered a new species.

The theft happened near Elliot in the Eastern Cape close to a remote dirt road.

Palaeontologists involved in excavating the dinosaur have given the thief or thieves until the end of the month to return the bone, or else they will open a case at a police station. The police have already been informed. It is believed that the crime took place in the early morning of May 17.

Dr Billy de Klerk, of the Albany Museum in Grahamstown, and Dr Jonah Choiniere, of Wits University, had been excavating the dinosaur close to a road cutting on the R393 between the Mountain Shadows Hotel and Moshesh's Ford.

"We believe this could be a significant find; it might even be a new species," said Choiniere.

From what they've seen of the fossil, the scientists believe the dinosaur might be a 200 million-year-old sauropodomorph, which had a long neck and long tail and was probably about 6m long.



STOLEN: The large thigh bone (femur) protruding from the ground next to the R393 near the Barkly Pass which was stolen on May 15.

Choiniere and De Klerk had spent two days excavating the site. They had glued part of the femur together and had been close to recovering it from the ground.

On the afternoon of May 16, they decided that they would leave the site and return in the morning.

The femur was exposed, but Choiniere felt there was little chance of anyone stealing it.

The site, while close to a road, was remote, with little traffic. The next morning they found the femur missing. "I have never had anything like this happen to me before," said Choiniere.

The femur is about 35cm long and 10cm in diameter, and probably weighed about 6kg.

Choiniere suspects that the

thief might have carried it a short distance to a vehicle.

The thief could have used a screwdriver to remove the bone.

The missing part has anatomical details that would be vital to identify the species.

Fossils are protected by the South African National Heritage Act 25 of 1999, and can be excavated, sold or traded only with a valid permit.

Fossils in South Africa, noted Choiniere, have no monetary value.

"It might look cool on a shelf, but the value to science is immeasurable," Choiniere said. "I don't care who you are, I just want it back."

Anyone with information about the missing fossil can contact Choiniere on 011 717 6684.