

Long-Necked Sea Monster Snuck Up on Victims

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A long-necked sea reptile that lived millions of years ago in what is now China may have used its stiff neck to sneak up on unsuspecting prey and suck them in, scientists said on Friday.

Dubbed *Dinocephalosaurus orientalis* or "terrible-headed lizard from the Orient," the monster had a neck 5.5 feet long, topped by a tiny head. At the other end was its big round body.

It may have been able to sidle up its small head to a fish or squid and devour the unwitting prey before the body hove into view, the researchers report in Friday's issue of the journal *Science*.

"To a fish in murky water, *Dinocephalosaurus*' head would have initially looked like another animal its own size, but by the time the fish was able to see *Dinocephalosaurus*' body, it would already have been lunch," said Michael LaBarbera, a biologist at the University of Chicago.

The finding shows another unique approach to hunting.

"The unusual neck morphology of *Dinocephalosaurus* would have allowed it to suction feed, a feeding mode previously unknown for fossil aquatic reptiles," LaBarbera said.

"But suction feeding in *Dinocephalosaurus* was different from suction feeding in any other animal. Rather than expand the volume of its mouth to suck in prey, *Dinocephalosaurus* expanded the volume of its throat, in many ways a more effective approach."

Other creatures called protorosaurs -- reptiles that lived before and during the dinosaur era -- have been found, and their long necks have puzzled scientists.

Protorosauria were an order of diverse predatory reptiles that lived as far back as 280 million years ago.

"*Dinocephalosaurus* sheds new light on the evolution of protorosaurs and the functional morphology of these long-necked marine reptiles," said Chun Li of the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing, who led the study.

Li first found a 9-inch (23.5-cm) -long skull in 2002 in the Guanling Formation in China's Guizhou Province. Three fangs survived.

Then he found a nearly complete fossil skeleton with a 6-inch (15.5 cm) skull and 25 elongated vertebrae.

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