

YZC Animal of the Month, December 2011

Giant Ground Sloth

Megatherium americanum



One of the giants of the lower gallery is *Megatherium americanum*, the Giant Ground Sloth. This animal is extinct, having died out around 8,000 years ago, but what

an amazing sight it would have been when it was alive! It would have weighed about the same as an elephant – that's pretty huge.

Like the sloths we see alive today (like the Two-Toed Sloth), the Giant Ground Sloth lived in South America, though some species of Ground Sloth did live in North America. Unlike today's sloths, *Megatherium* didn't live in the trees. One look at our specimen and you can see why – what tree could support an animal so huge! Instead, it would have lived on the ground. This animal could

have walked around on all fours, and could have risen up onto its hind limbs like a bear.

Fossil dung from some ground sloth species give us clues about what they ate. Despite their big claws, the diet of these megabeasts would have been mostly leaves, which they would have to have eaten in huge amounts to get enough nutrients to survive. Some people think that these animals could have eaten some meat as well, but scientists have yet to agree on this.

The Giant Ground Sloth was one of the last species of Ground Sloth to die out, going extinct about 8,000 years ago. The decrease in numbers and extinction of Ground Sloths seemed to happen at around the same time that humans arrived in the Americas. Could it be the people hunting these huge animals was one of the reasons they went extinct? Scientists haven't agreed on an answer to this question.