



## Tracking the Dinosauria Family Tree: An Interview with Dino Hunter Paul Sereno

by MICHELLE LALIBERTE

Paul Sereno  
takes careful  
notes in the  
field.

**P**aul Sereno could be called the “Indiana Jones” of paleontology. The University of Chicago paleontologist and professor admits to enjoying high adventure, but he says his ultimate thrill comes from unearthing the bones of dinosaurs that walked the Earth and stalked their prey millions of years ago. Sereno’s expeditions have taken him to remote areas of Argentina, China, Mongolia, and Africa, where he has helped discover six new species of dinosaurs. These finds have made a significant contribution to the understanding of the dinosaur family tree. *ODYSSEY* caught up with Sereno in Chicago just before he left on his latest expedition to Africa — Sahara 2000.

**What do you think is the biggest misconception that people have about dinosaurs?**

Well, most people think that all the dinosaurs lasted for the entire Mesozoic Era and got snuffed out by an asteroid. That couldn’t be further from the truth. Your average species lasted only a few million years, and new species arose all the time. It was a conveyor belt of species! The fact that different dinosaurs evolved on continents that had drifted apart is also news to a lot of people.

**Why do you think evolution (diversity of the species) took place so rapidly? Could it have been the dinosaurs’ huge size?**





Members of the Touareg tribe in Niger helped Sereno and his team (at left) locate dinosaur skeletons in the scorching Sahara desert.



Actually, it wasn't. First, keep in mind that all dinosaurs were not huge. Most were about six meters long or less. But their rapid evolutionary flowering had to do with the extinction of other land animals. At the dawn of the Mesozoic Era, dinosaurs *inherited* the world.

**It seems as if several new species of dinosaurs are discovered each year. And they seem to be getting bigger and bigger. Is there any way to estimate how many new dinosaur species remain to be discovered?**

There are plenty more dinosaur species to be described. We seem to be entering a Golden Era of sorts for new species, with six or seven new ones being described each year. That rate will probably slow down after another 50 years [so maybe 300 more!].

**What has been the most thrilling discovery of your career?**

When we found skeletons of *Herrerasaurus* — a little-known flesh-eating theropod — against the odds, in Patagonia, Argentina. It

was my first team — six young people joined me, and we found the earliest dinosaur on record, dating back to the middle Triassic Period, some 228 million years ago. Everyone said we couldn't do it, so after three weeks of searching, walking up to the skeleton — the way it was exposed with part of the skull and neck just visible on the surface of a rocky ledge — was the thrill of a lifetime!

**What is the most dangerous expedition that you've been on?**

The 1993 expedition to Niger [Africa] when we crossed the Sahara Desert twice, excavated six tons of dinosaur bone, and got it all back — as well as us — at the same time. That was a very exciting expedition!

**How do you actually search for dinosaur fossils?**

With legs, brains, and action. You need energy — lots of it; you need good legs. I like to go to places with good exposure — where there are dinosaur beds and outcroppings on the surface. You don't dig blindly. When you