

Fundamentals fact sheet: Ice Age plants & animals

Cold & warm variations in the Pleistocene

- The Pleistocene varied between warm (interglacial) and cold (glacial) periods, with most of these periods lasting between 30,000–50,000 years (see also **Resource 4_3: Ice Age or not**).
- In Europe, climates varied between warm, wet conditions similar to the present day (interglacial) and very cold, dry (glacial) conditions.

Characteristics of the glacial periods in Europe (see also Resource 4_3: Ice Age or not)

- Ice glaciers upto 1km thick spread across northern Europe (in Britain they nearly reached London at one point).
- Cold grasslands known as steppe or tundra dominated the land elsewhere.
- There were very few trees (and few wild plant foods).
- Sea-levels were very low (up to 120m lower than the present day in the coldest glacial periods).
- Animals such as woolly mammoths, woolly rhinoceros and reindeer were common.

Characteristics of the interglacial periods in Europe (see also Resource 4_3: Ice Age or not)

- Forests were present throughout much of Europe.
- Sea-levels were similar to the present day.
- Animals such as red deer, aurochs (wild cattle), horse, and straight-tusked elephant were common.
- During the warmest interglacials animals such as hippopotamus were also present in Europe.
- Wild plant foods were widely available – e.g. fruits and berries, nuts, and plant roots.

Adaptable animals

- Some animals were very adaptable, and survived in Europe during both glacial and interglacial periods. These adaptable animals included both herbivores (e.g. horse) and, especially, carnivores (e.g. cave lion, hyena and wolf).

How do we know what...Pleistocene landscapes were like?

- Identifying the different types of animals from their bones, teeth and other remains.
- Identifying the different types of plants from pollen.
- Examining the geological evidence (i.e. the rocks left behind by glaciers).
- Testing the chemical composition of cores from the bottom of the oceans and from the Arctic and Antarctic – the chemical patterns reveal the climate changes of the Pleistocene.