

T. rex not a stand-up guy? Test your dino skills

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NEW YORK (AP) -- Here's a test of your dinosaur knowledge: Did Tyrannosaurus rex stand upright, with its tail on the ground?

The answer: No. But a lot of young people seem to think so, and the authors of a study are blaming toys like Barney and other pop influences for that misconception.

Scientists used to think T. rex stood tall, but they abandoned that idea decades ago. Now, the ferocious dinosaur is depicted in a bird-like posture, tail in the air and head pitched forward of its two massive legs.

The change led major museums to update their T. rex displays, study authors said, and popular books have largely gotten the posture right since around 1990. So did the "Jurassic Park" movies.

But when the researchers asked college students and children to draw a T. rex, most gave it an upright posture instead. Why? They'd soaked up the wrong idea from toys like Barney, games and other pop culture items, the researchers conclude.

"It doesn't matter what they see in science books or even in 'Jurassic Park,'" says Warren Allmon, a paleontology professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., and an author of the study.

It struck him when he saw a box of dinosaur chicken nuggets at a grocery store.

"What they grew up with on their pajamas and their macaroni and wallpaper and everything else is the tail-dragging posture," he said.

If the explanation is correct, Allmon said, it's a sobering reminder of how people can get wrong ideas about science. The study will be published in the Journal of Geoscience Education.

The authors examined 316 T. rex drawings made by students at Ithaca College and children who visited an Ithaca museum. Most of the college students weren't science majors.

Seventy-two percent of the college students and 63 percent of the children drew T. rex as being too upright. Because the sample isn't representative of the general population, the results don't necessarily apply to young people in general.

When the authors looked at other depictions of T. rex, they found the obsolete standing posture remains in pop culture items like toys, games, cookie cutters, clothing, comics and movies.

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Mark Norell, a prominent paleontologist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York who didn't participate in the study, said he doesn't know if the upright-posture myth is as widespread as the new study indicates.

But he said it makes sense that children's first impressions of T. rex can persist. If they don't study dinosaurs later, "that's what they're stuck with."

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