Greta could be the first wooly mammoth-elephant hybrid—and the loneliest animal in the world

The room is bright and her bath is warm. A clamp slides over her sides. She squeals as it hoists her up, her trunk and feet gliding along the plastic walls. The temperature drops… A grinning being approaches her, white fluff all around its face. Is this her mother?

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The scientific project that may make our hypothetical friend Greta a reality is currently underway at Harvard University, supervised by renowned inventor of genetic technologies George Church. His team's goal is not to bring woolly mammoths back to life, per se, but to engineer mammoth–elephant hybrids. To that end, they have taken Asian elephant cells and edited woolly mammoth DNA sequences into them using the gene-editing tool known as CRISPR. These are the first steps to making an elephant with thicker hair, fattier insulating skin, smaller ears that allow less heat to escape, and the ability to bind and release oxygen in blood at freezing temperatures.

But why create a Greta when they could just do a better job at helping today's elephants thrive in the wild? Greta, too, may wonder about the point of it all. Her creators say their dream is to resurrect, not a species, but an entire ecosystem. And the productivity of the woolly mammoth's former ecosystem, they say, needs to be revived to stave off a climate catastrophe far worse than the one we already face.

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