



Published 2011

The Enigma of Living Fossils

by Warren Krug



Coelacanth

In 1939 a fisherman fishing off the coast of South Africa caught a remarkable fish called a [coelacanth](#) [see-luh-kanth]. What was remarkable about this coelacanth fish (scientific name: *Latimeria chalumnae*) is that it shouldn't have been in those waters – or in any waters – in 1939. Secular scientists had declared that the coelacanth had gone extinct some 65 million years ago. But there it was, alive and well, and since then other living coelacanths have been sighted and photographed.¹

1. Sea and Sky Presents the Sea. N.d. "Creatures of the Sea: Coelacanth." <http://www.seasky.org/deep-sea/coelacanth.html>

The coelacanth fish is just one of hundreds of examples of what are referred to as “living fossils.” The so-called living fossils are not a problem for Bible-believing scientists, but they are a puzzle – a hard to explain enigma for secular researchers who accept the theory of evolution and who believe that the earth is millions and billions of years old.

What is a Fossil?

Before trying to understand living fossils, we need to know what a fossil is. The word fossil comes from a word [Latin *fossilis*] that means “something dug up.”² It originally was used to refer to ancient manmade items, gems, or mineral ores. Today fossils are considered the remains or trace of once-living creatures which have been preserved in the ground by natural processes.

2. <http://www.Dictionary.com>. N.d. "Fossil." IAC Corporation. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/fossil> (accessed March 25, 2011).

Fossils are of different types. A process known as *permineralization* can form fossils when mineral material fills the cavity of an organism as it decays, duplicating the form of the creature.

Impressions are two-dimensional imprints most commonly found in silt or clay. A *trace* refers to impressions made by a creature as it moves over the surface of soft sediment. Entire bodies of creatures can be trapped and preserved in *amber*. Still other fossil classifications refer to how the fossil was preserved, such as by *drying, freezing, or by being compressed or compacted*. **3**

3. K. Mani, 1996. "Fossils: Windows to the Past." Berkeley. UCMP. <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/paleo/fossils> (accessed March 25, 2011).

Fossils offer evidence in nature that something important once happened in the past. When living things die, they begin decaying rapidly. If they lie around on the ground or on the bottom of the sea for years, they would have long since turned into nothing except perhaps for their bones or other hard parts. Yet we find numerous examples of plants and animals with impressions of their soft parts perfectly preserved in rock. That strongly suggests these organisms were buried quickly before they could decompose. We know of no historical event that was more likely to have buried so many creatures all over the world so rapidly than the chaotic Noah's Flood.

What are Living Fossils?

A living fossil is simply a fossil which looks virtually the same as its modern, living relative. Living fossils are not rare by any means. They are found throughout the fossil layers, and almost every family of living animal has been matched to fossils which appear amazingly similar.

Especially interesting are the living fossils, such as the coelacanth, which scientists had declared to have gone extinct "millions of years ago" only to find them doing well in the modern world. It is as if tomorrow an explorer would find a living *T-rex* roaming through some unexplored rain forest. Scientists refer to this type of living fossil as examples of a "Lazarus taxon."**4** This term refers to a species that seemed to disappear for many years only to reappear at a later time in the fossil record or in the living world, as if it were resurrected from the dead, like Lazarus in the Bible.

4. Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia. March 15, 2011. "Living Fossil." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Living_fossil (accessed March 25, 2011).

Another recent example of a living fossil that appears to fit the Lazarus taxon definition is the Wollemi pine tree (scientific name: *Wollemia nobilis*). This plant was discovered by a park ranger in 1994 in the Blue Mountains near Sydney, Australia. The tree, which reaches heights of 40 meters (130 feet), was thought to have become extinct 150 million years ago during the "age of the dinosaurs."**5** Yet another example of this type of living fossil is the lungfish.

5. Woodford, James. "Tree From The Dinosaur Age, And It's Alive." Sydney Morning Herald, December 14, 1994. http://netherlands.wollemipine.com/news/Found_Tree_from_the_Dinosaur_Age.php (accessed March 25, 2011).

How do Evolutionists Explain Living Fossils?

The discovery of so many living fossils representing so many different kinds of creatures does appear to pose a significant problem for the theory of evolution. We know that, according to Darwinism, there once were only simple organisms. These organisms gradually started evolving into more complex organisms until mammals evolved and eventually humans.

Evolution is sometimes defined as “progressive change” or simply “change.” **6** These evolutionary changes are said to happen because of mutations (changes in genes) and natural selection (“the fittest survive”). Yet all these examples of living fossils, sometimes representing quite primitive organisms, show little or no change at all over millions of years. Doesn't “no change” imply “no evolution”?

6. <http://www.Dictionary.com>. N. d. "Evolution." IAC Corporation.
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/evolution> (accessed March 25, 2011).

Darwinists do have something of an answer to this question. According to a creationist website, **7** evolutionists claim only small segments of populations of creatures split off the main groups to form new living beings while leaving the main groups unaffected. Another way of putting it is that in each case the main group “found its niche” and there was no pressure put on these animals to evolve into anything else. Of course, there is no evidence that the breaking off of small groups actually happened, and this answer seems like too easy a way out.

7. Creation Ministries International. N. d. "Arguments We Think Creationists Should NOT Use." Australia. <http://creation.com/arguments-we-think-creationists-should-not-use> (accessed March 25, 2011).

We are told natural selection and mutations caused single-celled organisms eventually to evolve into human beings. That's quite an accomplishment for blind processes! But haven't mutations and natural selection been processes that have been active down through the ages? How easy was it for these living fossil creatures to remain immune to these processes for millions of years while other creatures were evolving into more complex living things? Or why didn't all the early creatures “find their niche” and happily settle down to enjoying what they were?

It's up to the evolutionary scientists to show why the many living fossils are not a rebuke to their theory. They could easily do this by providing examples from the fossil record of slow progressions of creatures evolving from less complex organisms into animals which are far more complex. But where is there such an example, now that the famed horse evolution series has been cast into serious doubt by recent DNA studies? **8**

8. University of Adelaide (December 10, 2009). DNA sheds new light on horse evolution. ScienceDaily. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/12/091210092001.htm> (accessed March 25, 2011).

In one important respect Bible-believing Christians do believe in change. When we came to faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin, we became new beings “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24). When we get to heaven, we will inherit new, perfect, glorified bodies (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). In the Holy Bible we have a far more reliable testimony to the truth of these changes than any truth about changes we can glean from the record of the fossils. LSI

Warren Krug, a retired teacher, is the editor of the LSI Journal and is currently serving as president of the Lutheran Science Institute. He holds a B.S. in Education from Concordia University Chicago and a M.S. in Education from Oklahoma State University. He is a member at Trinity, Caledonia, Wisconsin.. Photos from Wikipedia.