Absence of Evidence

Occasionally we run into a catchy observation about some detail of our experience that has farreaching implications. I ran into one of these last year in one of my courses.

The statement read, *"absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."*

This saying was applied to the fossil record, indicating that when we do not find a particular organism as a fossil in certain earth layers, this does not necessarily mean that such an organism did not exist at that time.

A good example of this is the coelacanth fish. This is a large fish, about 5 feet long, which had been known from the fossil record only in layers which according to the evolutionists' geologic time table dates back to 70 million years. From then on this fish was said to be extinct, because no fossil record had been found of it in more recent earth layers.

Now it is interesting that in 1938 fishermen caught a live coelacanth fish off the coast of Madagascar. What a surprise! And what must scientists do with such an unexpected find? What is a possible explanation for the presence of this fish, thought to be extinct for so long? Where had it been all this time? One thought might be that this fish spontaneously generated in 1938 from the elements of the ocean. This is, of course, to be rejected at once, because the theory of spontaneous generation, which was held from the days of Aristotle, had been laid to rest for good by Pasteur, Redi an Spallanzani in the 1700's.

A more reasonable explanation would be that this fish has been living right along, and was not at all extinct during those so-called 70 million years. It was indeed absent from the known fossil record, but it was not absent from the earth. It was living, but not fossilized in layers closer to the earth's surface.

Thus we see that there is some scientific truth in the saying that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Or in other words, when we do not find fossil evidence of an organism, we cannot therefore conclude that it was not living at the time those earth layers were laid down. This is a strong indication that we have to deal with these phenomena with great caution.

Another striking aspect of this so-called "living fossil" is that it is morphologically indistinguishable from those fossil specimens which are said to be at least 70 million years old. Structurally they look the same. The question then comes to mind immediately why this species of fish would not have evolved in some way or other over all those millions of years, as the evolutionistic theories would demand. The answer sometimes given to this is that this fish is an extreme example of evolutionary conservatism, suggesting that this organism remained the same throughout the time of its long existence through some evolutionary force. Giving this phenomenon such a name, of course, does not really explain its prolonged absence in the geologic column. But the fish does demonstrate the constancy of species.

That species are not static, or completely unchangeable, we know from observation. But we also know that one species has not actually been observed to change into another. Such a transition no one has been able to demonstrate, and the idea is therefore purely speculative. We do observe that usually there is a certain amount of variation within a species, due to mutations of genes, or due to the normal exchange of parental genes. But the extent of variation is very limited, because every time a mutation occurs there is a change in DNA, and consequently an interference with the full functional operation of the cells of the organism. But an organism can sustain only just so many

mutations, and beyond that will no longer be viable, because it can no longer carry out all its metabolic functions. This has been demonstrated in experiments with fruit flies as well as plants.

And the coelacanth fish probably does not go back in time as far as 70 million years in the first place. If this fish was present during those more recent 70 million years while being missing from the geologic time table, there is no reason to think that it would not also be present for 70 to 100 million years before the time span that it is found in the fossil record. It is probably more scientific, and closer to the truth, to say that the coelacanth fish was present all the time, even though it was not found in certain earth layers. It was there since the time of creation when God called it into being with all the other fishes, as the Genesis record tells us. And that probably fairly recently.

We do not make scientific deductions from the Genesis account, of course, but that authoritative document does tell us that God created the fishes. Our finding of this living fossil coelacanth fish is quite compatible with that account, while the evolutionist's geologic time table is seriously called into question by these facts. How can we still believe in his claim of 70 million years?

We need due caution when interpreting the data, and when the data contradict our theories, we should look for new explanations which will explain all the available data better. We must rely on the presence of evidence, and not on its absence.

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