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MEDIA RELEASE

Ancient Aussies also enjoyed “a shrimp on the barbie”

The tiny remains of the first fossil shrimps in Australia have been found on an Outback crayfish farm – shedding light on the 100 million-year-old ecosystem of Australia’s ancient inland sea.

These new fossils were uncovered on Proa Redclaw Farm, near Julia Creek, QLD by Mr Graham Fysh in December 2015. “It’s not every day that you come across something in a paddock that was so well-preserved,” explained Mr Fysh. “I suppose you could say I was ecstatic.” This find comes after the discovery of a number of remarkable fossil fish on the same property last year.

Dr Patrick Smith, curator of Kronosaurus Korner – a marine fossil museum in nearby Richmond – recalls, “Dr Timothy Holland and I immediately recognised these specimens as fossilised shrimp which, to our surprise, were the first unearthed in Australia. Each of the fossils contained amazing details, including: body segments, tail spines and even their individual tiny legs.”

Despite being abundant in modern oceans, shrimp (members of the family Caridea) are relatively rare as fossils. This is because their bodies often decompose quickly and their skeletons are scattered by underwater physical processes, such as currents. Far more often the bodies of robust creatures like crabs and lobsters are found as fossils.

“Although these little guys are rare, it doesn’t mean they’re any less important in understanding the past,” clarified Dr Smith. “Just as shrimps are at the base of the food web in modern oceans, so too would they have been in the Cretaceous Period.”

“Modern shrimp are the staple diet for a number of animals including larger invertebrates, fish, turtles and seabirds. It’s likely during the Early Cretaceous, 100 million-years ago, some of the prehistoric relatives of these animals were preying on shrimp, just as they do today,” says Dr Timothy Holland, previous curator of Kronosaurus Korner. “However up until now there had been no evidence of shrimps living in Australia’s prehistoric inland seaways.”

“This new discovery sheds light on the complexity of the ecology in the marine realm during Australia’s prehistory. Hopefully this will help us to better understand how these ancient inland seas were able to support a huge variety of fish and monstrous marine reptiles,” added Dr Smith.

The fossil shrimp specimens are on display today at Kronosaurus Korner, in Richmond, QLD and are planned to be published in the scientific literature in the near future. Kronosaurus Korner is Australia’s Premier Marine Fossil Museum, showcasing over a thousand well-preserved fossils from Australia’s Cretaceous inland sea.

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