Order CERATODONTIFORMES

Australian Lungfishes

Family NEOCERATODONTIDAE

Schultz 1948

Neoceratodus Castelnau 1876

Neoceratodus forsteri (Krefft 1870) [vZ]\(\sim v\) vi\(\sim v\)


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Discovery and naming of the “great amphibian”

When Gerard Krefft named the Australian Lungfish after his old friend William Forster, it was more than an honor. It was an apology, too.

Krefft (1830–1881) was curator of the Australian Museum. Forster (1818–1882) was a politician, at the time serving as Minister of Lands for New South Wales. Forster owned large tracts of land in the Wide Bay-Burnett region of Queensland. He tantalized Krefft with tales of a freshwater “fish” with a cartilaginous backbone. Early settlers (called squatters) relished its pink flesh and called it “Burnett salmon.” Surely no such fish can exist, Krefft believed. He insisted that Forster was mistaken.

But Forster wasn’t mistaken. One day he presented Krefft with a box containing two salted fish collected by his cousin, William McCord, an amateur naturalist. Their entrails had been removed, but that didn’t matter. Krefft was amazed by what he saw. According to Krefft, the conversation went like this:

“Are they new?” said Forster. “No, I said, “they are old as the mountains of Australia, and if you will let me alone we will make a fortune with these fishes.” “Well” (wre his last words) “take them away, do what you like with them but make the discovery known in tomorrow’s Herald.” Of course I had to keep my word and other people earned the benefit.

Krefft kept his word. He announced the discovery of an Australian aquatic creature that had both lungs and gills not in a scientific journal, but in a letter to the editor in the 17 January 1870 edition of the Sydney Morning Herald, from which the name dates. By placing it in the genus Ceratodus, Krefft believed it was a living representative of a cosmopolitan genus of Triassic aquatic animals proposed by Louis Agassiz in 1838. Earlier paleontologists believed...
**Ceratodus** were allied to sharks. But with fresh material now in hand, Krefft believed the genus was allied to salamanders. In fact, he called the lungfish not a lungfish, but a “great amphibian.”

“In honour of the gentlemen who presented this valuable specimen to the Museum,” Krefft named it after Forster. In addition, Krefft said that he named the fish “in justice” to his friend, “whose observations I questioned when the subject [of an amphibious fish] was mentioned years ago, and to whom I now apologize.”

Krefft published a formal and more detailed description of the lungfish in *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* later that year. At some point, he composed this short verse for his son:

Lucullus ate Muraena rare,  
In Rome the daintiest dish,  
And Squatters on the Burnett dined  
On geologic fish.

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