Fingering yet another discredited 'evolutionary transition'

Who has not heard of the famous 'fingered fish'? The pectoral fin of the Devonian *Sauripteris*, we were told, is supposed to be an undoubted ancestral form to the tetrapod (land vertebrate) limb.[1]

To begin with, even if these features were in fact transitional to tetrapods, they would only be so in a very limited sense. Creationists have long pointed out that a genuine evolutionary progression leading from fish to tetrapods should show something like the following, all in correct stratigraphic order: a fish-like vertebrate with structures that are 90 % fin and 10 % leg in morphological character, succeeded by a form possessing structures which are 80 % fin and 20 % leg in morphology, and so on, eventually succeeded by a form having appendages which are 10 % fin and 90 % leg in morphology, and finally succeeded by a full-fledged early tetrapod. The existence of merely one fish with 'fingers' does not, by itself, have a leg to stand on as a genuine transition (pardon the pun). For all we know, it could be little more than a morphological oddball — a 'curious mosaic' like *Archaeopteryx*, to paraphrase Gould.

Yet, even if we grant the claim that the finger-like structures on *Sauripteris* do potentially represent a transitional feature leading from fish all the way to land-dwelling tetrapods and their limbs, we must ask the next logical question: 'What about the other anatomical features of *Sauripteris* ?' Are they also transitional between the usual-fish and usual-tetrapod morphological features? Until now, there has been no clear answer to this question, as the anatomy of rhizodont sarcopterygian fish, of which *Sauripteris* is a type, was poorly known.

Now comes news of the discovery of *Gooloogongia loomesi*, a rhizodont fish from the Devonian of New South Wales, Australia.[2] *Gooloogongia* shows almost none of the features that would be expected if indeed the rhizodont fish represented the lineage from which the tetrapods eventually evolved.

This fact most definitely buries the rhizodonts in general, and the 'finger' fish *Sauripteris* in particular, as an evolutionary transition leading to the presumed origin of tetrapods:

> *'The description of* Gooloogongia *improves our understanding of rhizodont anatomy, and shows conclusively that rhizodonts are less closely related to tetrapods than are osteolepiforms and elpistostegids. We conclude that the similarities between the pectoral appendage skeletons or* [sic — *of] rhizodonts and tetrapods are convergent, and urge that rhizodont pectoral fins not be used as model ancestors for tetrapod.* '[3]

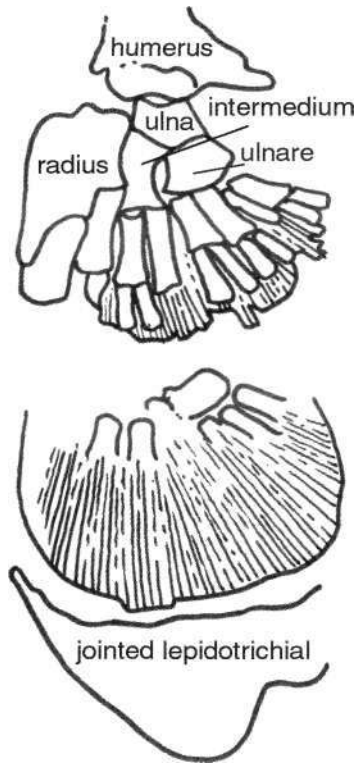

Figure 1. *Devonian pectoral fin skeleton of a)* Sauripteris, *the fingered fish and b) Rhizodont fish* Gooloogongia *(after Johanson and Ahlberg[2]).*

Having failed as a 'transitional form', the 'finger fish' thus finds its way to the 'convergence' wastebasket. Whatever its significance, it can no longer be seen as a precursor to tetrapod limbs. 'Convergence', of course, is an evolutionistic cover word for a morphological feature which shows similarity to some group to which it is not believed to be related by phylogeny (line of descent). Yet evolutionists continue to insist that a hierarchy of shared similarities proves common ancestry.

It is not difficult to predict how evolutionists in general will react when confronted with the evidence of this fallen transition. So long as the 'transition' seems acceptable, they trumpet it as fact. When the contrary is demonstrated, they change their tune to: 'Oh well, science is tentative, and constantly changing, anyway.' Strangely, we hear nothing about the tentativeness of science when the transition is believed to be valid.

Consider also the earlier public exposure to this ancient organism. When the 'fingered fish' was first announced, it got a great deal of attention in the mass media. Will the recent study of Johanson and Ahlberg get the same attention? We will be fortunate to see so much as a footnote in the newspapers. Then again, this is the same old story. Whenever a new 'evolutionary transition' or any other 'proof for evolution, e.g. the 'Martian life', is alleged, the media give it prominent coverage, and present it as fact. However, a fallen 'evolutionary transition' seldom if ever is considered newsworthy by the media elite. No wonder the public is so indoctrinated about the 'fact' of evolution.

References

1. Daeschler, E.B. and Shubin, N., 1998. Fish with fingers? *Nature* 391(6663): 133.
2. Johanson, Z., and Ahlberg, P.E., 1998. A complete primitive rhizodont from Australia. *Nature* 394(6693): 569-573.
3. Johanson and Ahlberg, ref. 2, p. 572.

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