



Ancient Sea Creatures

Many species of sea creatures have evolved over millions of years. Along the way, some truly amazing species have disappeared completely. Others have clung on, changing very little since the time of the dinosaurs.

Frilled sharks

These strange-looking sharks haven't changed much in 80 million years. They inhabit the deepest, darkest depths of the ocean and look more like a snake than a shark. Much like a snake, they are able to unhook their jaw and open it even wider when they eat. This means they can eat much bigger prey.

Coelacanth

For a long time, biologists and palaeontologists thought that this large species of fish had disappeared for good along with the dinosaurs. Then, in 1938, it was rediscovered lurking in the depths of the ocean. They've changed very little in the last 360 million years. They are one of the strongest links between fish and amphibians – their fins are fleshy and stick out from their body like legs. When coelacanths swim, their fins move in pairs, much like amphibians legs do when they walk.

Nautilus

The oceans once teemed with tens of thousands of species of nautilus. Some of them were truly enormous. Today, only a handful of species still survive, and they are at risk from overfishing. Collectors love their intricately coloured shells. These strange molluscs use sensors on their tentacles to "taste" their prey in the water before devouring them with their beak-like mouth.

Stromatolites

Stromatolites might not belong in a list of deep-sea creatures - they live in shallow water and often break out above the surface. However, no list of ancient sea creatures would be complete without



them.

Unique among all living things, stromatolites can say they were there when it all began. These tiny microbes cling together to form vast rocky structures, much like coral reefs. They've been doing this for the last 3.5 billion years and were one of the first living things on Earth. Along with other simple bacteria, their respiration built up the oxygen content of the atmosphere to roughly 20%, which meant that other, larger creatures could evolve.

If you want to see a living stromatolite structure today, the best place is in Western Australia. A metal walkway juts out into the shallow water so that visitors can walk amongst the stromatolites without damaging them.

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Which creatures in the list were around when life began?
2. Which creatures were thought to be extinct?
3. Which animals are at risk because of their colourful shells?
4. How long have stromatolites been around?
5. How much oxygen was needed in the air to allow other animals to evolve?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

S

How are coelacanths similar to amphibians?

S

How are frilled sharks similar to snakes?

V

Which phrase means that some species have managed to keep going throughout history?

V

Find and copy a word that means something was found again.

S

Why might stromatolites not belong on this list?