

UNKNOWN'S PODCAST

Clip from Episode 3: Human Origins Transcript

Host: David Christian, historian, founder of Big History, and emeritus professor at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Guest: Michael Archer, paleontologist and evolutionary biologist at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Earth, Life, and Evolution

Michael Archer: Australia separated from the rest of the continents about 50 million years ago to become a gigantic, isolated island, we became a huge natural laboratory for evolution to play around with. The other inhabited continents have been connected many times. That's why species of elephants, lions, horses and primates have all thrived from Asia to South America, but they've never showed up in Australia, and it's why kangaroos, koalas, emus, they only occur in Australia, nowhere else. Mind, some classic Australian groups like the egg-laying platypus did once occupy other continents before the breakup. We found fossil platypuses in Argentina that thrived there until about 61 million years ago. Similarly, we now know that some marsupials that evolved in Australia were able to wander across a then forested Antarctica to establish themselves in South America, where they still live today. So, continents have been both barriers and bridges, depending on the changing face of planet Earth.