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Opening Extract from...

David Attenborough's First Life

A Journey Back in Time

Written by Sir David Attenborough

with Matt Kaplan

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Collecting and Classifying

“ Although fossils were my main passion as a boy, I loved collecting other things as well: birds’ nests, rocks and snake skins. I collected just about anything that gave me a sense of the world around me, of its diversity and history.

When I was around 16 years old, I planned a very ambitious trip in order to understand the geology of the Lake District. I made myself a couple of canvas bags to fill with geological specimens, and a long box, which I filled with straw. I fitted the bags to my bicycle and posted the box to the goods department of a station along my route.

Once I’d collected several hundred little specimens I was able to put them in the box when I caught up with it, and send it on to the next station. This way I managed to do a whole circuit of the Lake District collecting rocks and fossils, staying in youth hostels along the way.

It was a marvellous trip and I collected a whole pile of specimens for my collection. In the end I had so many bits and bobs that my father allowed me to create a little museum in the University College of Leicester, where he was principal.

I’m very glad I developed my love of collecting; it’s a very valuable way to engage in natural history and it taught me a great deal. By collecting objects and examining them you can work out a system of classification and notice variations. It allows you to understand which species or forms are common and which are rare.

Classification and identification form the basis of natural history. It’s no accident that Charles Darwin, arguably the greatest natural historian who ever lived, was crazy about collecting beetles. He was determined to discover a new species before his beetle-collecting rival, Charles ‘Beetle’ Babington. He once spotted a new beetle and as he already had a beetle in each hand, he put one in his mouth to keep it captive while grabbing the new one. Unfortunately, this cantankerous beetle fired acid into his mouth, causing him to drop and lose the new species!

I’m not sure whether he managed to beat his rival, but over those years of collecting he most certainly developed a keen eye for fine detail. This undoubtedly helped him to spot the similarities and differences between the famous finches in the collections he brought back from the Galapagos Islands.

I could never compare myself to the great and inspired Darwin; I’m just a broadcaster with a passion for the natural world. I would say, however, that my love of collecting certainly has helped me to understand and greatly appreciate the sheer variety of life that exists around us, and indeed the variety of life that came before us.”



Opabinia

“ Whilst filming *First Life* I was able to retrace the steps of Charles Doolittle Walcott through the Burgess Shale site in the Canadian Rockies and imagine his reaction to finding, lying on the shale, a beautiful, tiny fossil of a kind he had never seen before: *Opabinia*.

No creature like *Opabinia* exists on Earth today. It was very much an evolutionary experiment – a bizarre animal with five mushroom-like eyes. There are clues as to how this creature may have lived: it lacked legs but had a broad tail and flaps along both sides of its body. Computer reconstructions of the fossil suggest it moved by wafting these flaps, giving it great flexibility of movement in the water.

Opabinia also possessed a flexible proboscis on its head with which it grabbed food from the floor of the shallow sea in which it lived. It was a truly primitive creature and one that left no descendants. Walcott was wise enough not to try to classify *Opabinia* amongst either the annelid



worms or the arthropods that arose around that time, and scientists are still somewhat baffled as to where it fits in the evolutionary tree of life.

Opabinia wasn't alone in the Cambrian seas. Countless other bizarre creatures burst onto the scene at the same time. It was an unprecedented surge of diversity, something that had never happened before and has not happened since.

The creatures found in the Burgess Shale fascinated Walcott, who returned there many times over the 15 years following his initial discoveries. He even brought his family along to help, and together they amassed an astonishing 65,000 fossils.

Despite the Walcotts' huge contribution to our understanding of the Cambrian period, and the work done by palaeontologists since then, there are still many unsolved questions about these perplexing creatures, questions that I'm not sure we'll ever manage to answer."

