Open Forum 1
Web Site Transcript
Chapter 3

A = Radio announcer
B = Dr. Jennifer White

A: Today on The Natural World, we're profiling the naturalist, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, who passed away on May 17th, 2004, at the age of 97. Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer was the naturalist who discovered an extremely rare fish called the "coelacanth" in 1938 and introduced it to the scientific world. With us is Dr. Jennifer White, a biologist from New Haven, Connecticut. She is going to talk about Latimer's discovery. Welcome Jennifer.

B: Thank you! Well, Ms. Courtenay-Latimer was a really wonderful woman, and she lived a long and interesting life. She was the curator of a small museum in the town of East London in South Africa, and during her life, she collected many, many kinds of animals. But her discovery of a coelacanth was truly amazing!

A: Tell us what she found.

B: Well, the year was 1938. She had an agreement with a local fisherman that she could look through his catch—that is, the fish that he caught during the day—and if the fisherman caught anything interesting, she was allowed to take it for her museum.

So one day she went down and she looked through the pile of fish and found nothing. Just as she was leaving, she saw an unusual-shaped blue-colored fin poking out of the pile. She pushed away the rest of the fish and pulled this large blue fish out. Right away, she knew that this fish was different. She asked to take it back to her museum. Apparently she had a hard time convincing a taxi driver to let her bring this 5-foot dead fish in the car!

A: Did Marjorie know what she had found? Did she realize how important her discovery was?

B: Well, she knew it was something special, but she didn't know what. When she got back to her lab, she couldn't find anything like it in her books. She wondered if it might be a coelacanth, but the idea seemed impossible. According to her books, the coelacanth no longer existed. They had been extinct for 65 million years! She wrote to Dr. Smith, a professor interested in ichthyology—that's the study of fish—to see what he thought. She drew a little picture and described it as a 127-pound fish with thick scales and fins that look like arms and legs. She wrote that there was no skeleton but that there was a soft, oil-filled tube in its back.

A: What did the professor say?

B: He was very excited when he got the letter and he came down to see the fish. And he decided that it was in fact a coelacanth. He named it Latimeria Chalumnae after Marjorie Latimer and Chalumnae because that was the name of the river near where it was found.

A: Tell us what a coelacanth is and why it might be important.

B: Well, coelacanth fossils are dated to as much as 400 million years ago. So coelacanth are even older than the dinosaurs. They seemed to have disappeared around the same time as dinosaurs… about 65 million years ago. It's just incredible that an animal assumed to be long gone could actually still be living.

The coelacanth is a very strange fish, though. It's got some things that are quite different from modern fish. For instance, it has a jelly-filled organ called a "rostral organ." This is the only living creature with this organ. It also has an incredibly small brain—smaller than any other animal we know of. I suppose the small brain size hasn't hurt the fish, since the coelacanth has clearly survived for millions of years.

A: So do coelacanths only live off the coast of Africa?

B: Well, we thought so until not too long ago. In 1998, an American couple was on their honeymoon in Indonesia when they found a coelacanth at a fish market there. Instead of the blue color, as the fish around Africa were, this fish was brownish-gold colored. Again, it was an amazing discovery. Scientists offered a small reward for coelacanth and asked to be notified if a fisherman ever caught one. Ten months later, they were told of a coelacanth that was actually still alive. They had a chance to swim next to it before it died.

A: Incredible! Thank you so much for sharing this story of an amazing fish and the woman who first discovered it. I want to let our listeners know that there are now organizations to help save the coelacanth from being killed by fishermen. Instead of finding new coelacanths for research, we are trying to preserve the ones that are alive.