

Oldest mother ever discovered by Museum Victoria

Media are invited to the unveiling of the fossilised remains of the oldest mother ever discovered, at Melbourne Museum at 12pm, Thursday 29 May. One of the biggest breakthroughs in palaeontology ever made, the specimen is a 375 million year old placoderm fish with embryo and umbilical cord attached, making the fossil the oldest example of vertebrate sex ever discovered.

The finding is one of the most significant ever made by Australian scientists and is published today in the prestigious *Nature* publication. The fossil was found in the Gogo area of north-west Western Australia and has been named *Materpiscis attenboroughi* after the famed naturalist Sir David Attenborough.

“The discovery is certainly one of the most extraordinary fossil finds ever made. It is not only the first time ever that a fossil embryo has been found with an umbilical cord, but it is also the oldest known example of any creature giving birth to live young,” said Dr John Long, Head, Sciences, Museum Victoria.

“The existence of the embryo and umbilical cord within the specimen provides scientists with the first ever example of internal fertilisation - i.e sex - confirming that some placoderms had remarkably advanced reproductive biology. This discovery changes our understanding of the evolution of vertebrates,” he added.

The fossil find was made on an Australian Research Council funded expedition led by the paper’s lead author Dr John Long of Museum Victoria along with co-authors Dr Kate Trinajstic of the University of Western Australia and Dr Gavin Young and Dr Tim Senden from The Australian National University.

“To say that I am thrilled by the news puts it mildly. I am extremely flattered that you should give my name to such an astonishing creature. The skill with which you have revealed and identified the umbilical cord is really extraordinary. Thank you for you and your colleagues for this marvellous honour.” said Sir David Attenborough in a letter to Dr Long.

Measuring around 25cm in length, the mother is an extinct placoderm fish, the dominant group of vertebrates throughout the Middle Palaeozoic Era (c. 420 to 350 million years ago). The placoderms, often referred to as ‘the dinosaurs of the seas’, were the rulers of the world’s lakes and seas for almost 70 million years.

The fossil will go on display in the foyer of Melbourne Museum from May 29.

WHAT:	The unveiling of the world’s oldest mother, a 375 million year old fossilised placoderm fish with intact embryo and umbilical cord
WHO:	Dr John Long, world-renowned palaeontologist and Head, Sciences, Museum Victoria
WHEN:	12pm, Thursday 29 May, 2008
WHERE:	Discovery Centre, Melbourne Museum. Media parking available on the plaza. Enter via Rathdowne Street.
NOTE:	World first XCT scans created by the ANU and Museum Victoria as well as high quality CGI animation of the living fish giving birth as well as images of the skeleton with embryo will be made available to media.

-ENDS-

For further media information, interviews or images, please contact:

Jessica Bendell on 03 8341 7726, 0439 341 007 or jbendell@museum.vic.gov.au