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Uses of Fossils.

Perhaps the first and most obvious lesson to be gleaned from the study of fossils is the elementary truth that life, even in the earliest times, in its various functions and characteristics, differed in no way from the life of to-day.

Further, we observe (a) that the lowly types of life that appear in the oldest rocks have persisted through all geological times up to the present day; (b) that new genera of progressively higher types suddenly appear as we ascend the geological scale; and (c) that many genera have a limited range in time.

From our knowledge of the distribution and habits of related existing faunas and floras, we have no difficulty in distinguishing terrestrial and marine organisms, or the inhabitants of warm and arctic seas, or the littoral from the pelagic.

Hence the fossils contained in a rock-formation form a permanent record of the climatic and physical conditions prevailing at the time the sediments which enclosed them were being deposited. They tell of the former existence of continents, rivers, lakes, estuaries, and seas; of tropical heat and arctic cold.

Looking for something else, I stumbled across the following quotation, [reproduced](#) [6] on a young-earth creationist ministry's website under the heading "Quotes to Note" and credited to *Creation* 2(1):4, which appeared in January 1979:

The obvious lesson from the study of fossils is the elementary truth that life even in the earliest times, differed in no way from life today. Further, we observe that the lower types of life that appear in the oldest rocks have persisted through all geological times up to the

present day.

The passage is attributed to James Park's *Textbook of Geology*. Neither a publisher nor a place of publication nor even a year is provided, although such information is provided for other quotations appearing under the same heading.

But here's a clue. The same passage, described as "from a very recent geologist," is quoted elsewhere—in, to be precise, the early young-earth creationist Byron C. Nelson's "*After Its Kind*" (1927—yes, 1927), where Nelson renders it as:

Perhaps the first and most obvious lesson to be gleaned from the study of fossils is the elementary truth that life, even in the earliest times, *differed in no way from the life of today*. Further, we observe that the lowly types of life that appear in the oldest rocks have persisted through all geological times up to the present day. (emphasis in original)

Nelson was rather more conscientious in his attribution than was *Creation*, specifying that he was quoting from p. 265 of Park's *Textbook of Geology*, published in 1925—fifty-four years before *Creation* took note of it!

Creation provides just the bare quotation from Park, with a disclaimer to ward off any suggestion that his mainstream approach to geology is endorsed: "Those who are acquainted with the Flood model of Earth history will be aware that the terms 'oldest rocks' and 'through all geological times' are only valid in the context of the evolutionary/geologic column. The reason why Prof. Park's observation applies is precisely that he has misinterpreted the fossil bearing rocks as a 'time sequence'." Nelson, however, uses it to supplement a quotation from Thomas Henry Huxley about "persistent types" (which I [discussed](#) [7] a while ago). In either case, though, readers are likely to be left with the impression that Park—*Professor Park*, the author of a *textbook*, yet—thinks that there is no change to be discerned in the fossil record.

Well, let's see. Park's book was in fact entitled *A Text-Book of Geology*, and neither *Creation* nor Nelson managed to give the quotation entirely accurately (although Nelson was closer). What Park actually wrote was:

Perhaps the first and most obvious lesson to be gleaned from the study of fossils is the elementary truth that life, even in the earliest times, in its various functions and characteristics, differed in no way from the life of to-day.

Further, we observe (a) that the lowly types of life that appear in the oldest rocks have persisted through all geological times up to the present day; (b) that new genera of progressively higher types suddenly appear as we ascend the geological scale; and (c) that many genera have a limited range in time.

These are the first two paragraphs in a section entitled "Uses of Fossils" (see above) in a chapter entitled "Fossils: Their Occurrence, Preservation, Classification, and Uses"—the significance of which will swiftly become apparent.

The most significant divergence between the original and the mangled versions of Nelson and *Creation*, I suggest, is the omission of “in its various functions and characteristics.” It would have been bizarre for Park to claim that there was no difference between the earliest life and today’s life, especially when he repeatedly acknowledges that new forms of life have appeared in the fossil record (“suddenly,” he says, although he is clear that he means in geological terms, emphasizing that “[t]he geologic day is not measured by years”). But it wouldn’t be bizarre for Park to claim that there was no difference between the earliest life and today’s life *in respect of the functions and characteristics that define life*—in being composed of cells, maintaining homeostasis, undergoing metabolism, engaging in growth, reproducing, or what have you.

And indeed that seems to be Park’s point, for he proceeds, in “Uses of Fossils,” to conclude, “Hence the fossils contained in a rock-formation form a permanent record of the climatic and physical conditions prevailing at the time the sediments which enclosed them were being deposited.” Providing that record is, presumably, among their uses, and they are very useful indeed in, for example, petroleum exploration, as Brian J. O’Neill explains in a [piece](#) [8] for the University of California Museum of Paleontology’s website. But if there were no reason to believe that fossils represent what were once organisms alive in the same basic way in which today’s organisms are alive—if they were mere *lusus naturae*, freaks of nature—there would be no reason to expect them to be, and no explanation of how they could be, useful in the ways that they demonstrably are.

It’s hard to know what’s more dismaying here: that it was apparently too difficult for Nelson to reproduce a passage from “a very recent geologist” accurately, or that *Creation* was citing a passage from what was then a fifty-four-year-old textbook as though it were bang up to date, or that neither Nelson nor *Creation* realized—or cared—that their interpretation of the passage was obviously untenable. Born in 1857, Park died in 1946, so it wouldn’t have been impossible for him to have learned about Nelson’s misuse of his textbook, but since his professional career was spent in New Zealand (to which he emigrated from Britain in the mid-1870s), it’s not too likely. I note that a short biography of him in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* [describes](#) [9] him as possessing “an inability to suffer fools gladly,” so perhaps it’s just as well.

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