

Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer

(1907 – 2004)

Discoverer of the Coelacanth



Miss M. Courtenay-Latimer

Main image: Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer [The South African Institute for Aquatic Biology, CC BY-SA 3.0].
Background: Scales of Common Roach [Kallerna, CC BY-SA 3.0].

Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer was an avid naturalist from a young age, and although trained to be a nurse, took a job as the founding curator of the Museum of East London, a coastal city in South Africa. She befriended local fisherman Captain Hendrick Goosen, and often inspected his catch for specimens to add to the museum's collection. In December 1938, she noticed an unusual fish in Goosen's catch, describing it as *"the most beautiful fish I had ever seen, five feet long and a pale mauve blue with iridescent silver markings"*. Unusually, the fish was nearly 60 kg, covered in hard scales and had four limb-like fins. Courtenay-Latimer didn't know what it was, but recognised it was unusual and transported it back to the museum in a taxi. The museum's chairman dismissed the find as being "nothing but rock cod". But after examining reference books, Courtenay-Latimer concluded that the specimen was remarkably similar to a prehistoric fish called a coelacanth, believed to have become extinct at the end of the Cretaceous, more than 65 million years ago.

Courtenay-Latimer made a sketch of the fish and sent it to her friend James Smith at Rhodes University, a chemistry professor and fish enthusiast. In the meantime, she attempted to have the fish stored in the local morgue and then the cold storage depot, but was turned away from both. Eventually she sent the fish to a taxidermist who skinned and gutted the animal to preserve it.

Smith immediately confirmed Courtenay-Latimer's suspicions that the find was a coelacanth, thought to be a "missing link" between fish and tetrapods, and described it as "the most important zoological find of the century". The living fossil was eventually named *Latimeria chalumnae* in Courtenay-Latimer's honour.

