

Australian scientists piece together toothy wombat ancestor

March 29 2023



Close relative of *Mukupirna fortidentata* named *Mukupirna nambensis*.
Reconstruction of the Pinpa faunal assemblage by Peter Schouten. Credit:
Flinders University

A chunky wombat ancestor with a powerful bite wandered Australia's once-lush Outback around 25 million years ago munching on fruit and

nuts, fossils found by Australian scientists have shown.

A team of scientists from Flinders University pieced together fossils uncovered in Australia's remote Northern Territory to reveal the long-extinct marsupial named *Mukupirna fortidentata*.

The paleontologists also identified an ancient possum named *Chunia pledgei*, which they said had "bizarre nut-cracker teeth".

"These curious beasts are members of marsupial lineages that went extinct long ago, leaving no modern descendants," said Arthur Crichton, from Flinders University's Paleontology Laboratory.

"Learning about these [animals](#) helps put the wombat and possum groups that survive today in a broader evolutionary context."

The fossils were uncovered in several digs over the past decade, enabling the team to reconstruct the archaic animals back in the laboratory.

The [wombat](#)-like creature boasted a powerful bite, likely dined on tough fruits and nuts and was thought to weigh up to 50 kilograms (110 pounds), making it one of the largest marsupials alive at the time.

The creature is linked to *Mukupirna nambensis*—discovered in 2020—a giant relative that would dwarf most of today's wombats.

Mukupirna fortidentata lower jaw



wombat lower jaw



Left lower jaw of *Mukupirna fortidentata* compared with that of the southern hairy-nosed wombat. Credit: Arthur Crichton (Flinders University).

Although it was unclear what drove the beast extinct, it disappeared during a period of changing climate as ancient forest regions in Australia's center became increasingly arid, said Professor Gavin Prideaux, director of the university's paleontology lab.

"While wombats were very successful over the succeeding period, the

mukupirnids seem to have gone extinct sometime before the end of the late Oligocene (25-23 million years ago)," Prideaux said.

Less was known about the early possum of the Ektopodontidae family because it was a "tantalizingly rare" find, but it sported a lemur-like face with "very strange teeth", Crichton said.

© 2023 AFP

Citation: Australian scientists piece together toothy wombat ancestor (2023, March 29) retrieved 12 June 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-03-australian-scientists-piece-toothy-wombat.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.