

Humans, meet 'Your Inner Fish' on PBS science show

April 8 2014, by Lynn Elber



This photo released by PBS shows host Neil Shubin of "Your Inner Fish," a three-part documentary PBS series that examines the evolution of the human body. It debuts Wednesday, April 9, 2014, on PBS. (AP Photo/PBS, Courtesy of Nathaniel Chadwick Copyright Tangled Bank Studios, LLC)

Neil Shubin would like to introduce you to your family tree, the one with roots reaching back more than 3 billion years.

In a three-part PBS series debuting Wednesday and based on Shubin's

best-selling book, "Your Inner Fish," the paleontologist shares scientific research that connects humans to the early animals that made us what we are today.

Shubin is an engaging guide for a trip across time and continents and complexity, making room for humor and providing clarity for non-scientists—all while asserting the imperative of scientific theory and findings in a sometimes-doubting world.

"My personal strategy is to show the power of the [scientific evidence](#) and how fun, how joyful it can be to discover something no one else has seen before," Shubin said.

He knows that firsthand. Most notably, he was part of a team in 2004 that discovered an Arctic fossil representing "a beautiful intermediate between [fish](#) and land-living animals," as he wrote in his 2008 book, one that combined scales and fins with the arms, wrists and joints of early land animals that crawled from the sea.

The PBS series (check local listings for times) uses globe-spanning video along with animation and illustration to show human physical traits that are the legacy of early animal ancestors. Episode one covers "Your Inner Fish," with episodes two and three focused on reptiles and monkeys, respectively.

Among the many examples: A genetic mutation in early primates resulted in the human ability to distinguish colors but eroded our sense of smell, while the fetal amniotic sac developed as a way to keep reptile eggs from drying out.



This photo released by PBS shows host Neil Shubin of "Your Inner Fish," holds a cast of a fossilized Tiktaalik roseae. The three-part documentary series examines the evolution of the human body. It debuts Wednesday, April 9, 2014, on PBS. (AP Photo/PBS, Courtesy of Nathaniel Chadwick Copyright Tangled Bank Studios, LLC)

Shubin, an associate dean for the University of Chicago's biological sciences division, understands he's fighting head winds, whether he's in the classroom or on TV. There's competition for attention in a multimedia world and, of course, those who dismiss evolution in favor of creationism.

His answer is to return to the importance of data, such as the DNA test results presented in "Your Inner Fish" that link humans to other animals.

"We live in a society where evidence really matters. We don't go to a surgeon who doesn't rely on evidence. We don't fly in an airplane where the engineers didn't use evidence to justify the aerodynamics of the plane," he said.

Shubin's impeccable science remains approachable, said Beth Hoppe, PBS' chief programming executive.

"He's a friend and you're having a conversation," she said.

As for those who question evolution, Hoppe said, in science programming "we trust the accepted wisdom of the science and present it as that," with news reporting the place to deal with "the politics of it. ... We stick to the science of it and make sure our experts are top-notch."

"Your Inner Fish" is part of PBS' newly launched "Think Wednesday" lineup, a three-hour prime-time block of nature, science and technology programs. The "Nature" and "NOVA" series anchor the first two hours, with special programs like "Your Inner Fish" rounding out the night.

The opening "Think Wednesday" schedule is animal-centric. It starts with "My Bionic Pet" on "Nature," about the development of prosthetics for injured animals, followed by the debut of a three-part "NOVA" series, "Inside Animal Minds," airing through April 23. The episodes include "Bird Genius," "Dogs & Super Senses" and "Who's the Smartest?"

While PBS remains dominant in consistent science programming, it's been joined this season by a broadcast network offering, Fox's "Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey," with astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, a 21st-

century version of PBS' groundbreaking 1980 series hosted by astronomer Carl Sagan.

Shubin, for his part, welcomes the company: "Anything that elevates a sense of wonder and anything that brings an interest to science is going to carry over," he said.

"The more we engage widely, the more we can bring [science](#) into the civic and national conversation, the more we can bring the aspirations of scientists and how we look at the world to the general public, the better," Shubin said.

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