

Shrimp find set in stone

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A close-up of a fossilised shrimp located on a remote property near Julia Creek.

IT is far too late to throw this shrimp on the barbie. In fact, it is about 100 million years too late.

But that hasn't stopped archaeologists from getting excited by a fishy find unearthed near Richmond.

"It's not every day that you come across something in a paddock that was so well-preserved," Kronosaurus Korner curator Dr Patrick Smith said. "I suppose you could say I was ecstatic."

The tiny remains of fossil shrimp were found on the Proa Redclaw Farm near Julia Creek in December, shedding new light on the 100 million-year-old ecosystem of Australia's ancient inland sea.

The find comes after the discovery of a number of remarkable fossil fish on the same property last year.

Dr Patrick Smith said he, and former curator Dr Timothy Holland, both immediately recognised the specimens as fossilised shrimp.

He said the museum had never received such a donation.

"Each of the fossils contained amazing details including body segments, tail spines and even their individual tiny legs," Dr Smith said.

Despite being abundant in modern oceans, shrimp are relatively rare as fossils because their bodies often decompose quickly and their skeletons are scattered by underwater physical processes such as currents.

"Although these little guys are rare, it doesn't mean they're any less important in understanding the past," Dr Smith said.

"Just as shrimps are at the base of the food web in modern oceans, so too would they have been in the Cretaceous Period."

But Dr Holland said there had only been limited evidence of shrimp living in Australia's prehistoric inland seas.

"This new discovery sheds light on the complexity of the ecology in the marine realm during

Australia's prehistory," he said.

Dr Smith said he hoped the find would help researchers to better understand how Australia's ancient inland seas were able to support such a huge variety of fish and monstrous marine reptiles.

But possibly one of the biggest age-old questions remains unanswered. Is it a shrimp or a prawn?

"You can probably use the words interchangeably," Dr Smith said. "But in the fishing world, anything that has a straight back is a prawn and anything with a kinked back is a shrimp.

"Both are broad terms ... scientists tend to avoid both terms altogether and describe them as caridea."

Unfortunately, throw another caridea on the barbie just doesn't have the same ring to it.

The fossil shrimp specimens are now on display at Kronosaurus Korner in Richmond.