



Photo by Charlie Cook

Up River and Down Under

by Mark Renz

For you

For those of you who are forced to tag along with your crazy fossil-hunting spouse or friend, this book is really for you. It will help you understand why they are nuts and you are sane. It won't help you convince them to change their hobby to something less space-consuming like stamp collecting. But it will teach you a useful language so that when he or she bursts through the door wet and muddy, screaming, "you'll never believe the size of the *C. megalodon* tooth I found today!", you will have a clue what they're talking about. And, by adding, "Was it an upper or lower tooth dear? An anterior or posterior?", your anal half will find you irresistible. That's really what this book is all about. But let's keep it to ourselves, okay?



C. megalodon teeth

What you see

You see a lawn unmowed, a fence in disrepair, a car in need of an oil change and a half-crazed mate who routinely deserts you in a quest for old rocks. But what you don't see is the world he or she visits – the other dimensions, the connection to time and space. You don't see the seventh sense that kicks in when the hunt begins.

I can vouch for that sense and for how all the other senses embrace it. When I'm walking the trail or paddling my kayak up Florida's Peace River, I feel as if I am truly alive and always have been. Touching lifeless black rocks that once belonged to living, breathing creatures, connects me to their time and place. I not only live now, but then too. I am humbled by this connection, energized in the present while holding a piece of the past.

By the time I return home, I feel as if my internal hard drive has been reformatted. That is, until I hear a loving voice say, "So when are you going to mow the yard?"



Where am I? How did I get here?

Now that I'm a wee bit past 20, I ask myself those two questions more often, especially when I'm stuck in city traffic with no techno tools to guide me. But waist deep in the Peace River I know right where I am and have a good idea how I got there.

I am a curious up-righter, a member of *Homo sapiens*, or modern humans. I look inward and outward, forward and backward, trying to piece together puzzles in life. I want to know all about the ancient people who came before me, the living people

surrounding me and the people who will live on long after I'm gone.

I want to know about the plants and animals that had a role in my evolutionary journey and how they have changed over time. If there really was a Big Bang some 14 ½ billion years ago, then we humans were absent from the picture for most of that time. What are the infinite odds that the earliest life forms would ever evolve from such humble single-celled organisms into complex mammals? Or that mammals would ever evolve into primates, or that the trillions upon trillions of modern human eggs and sperm cells would ever produce me, or you who are reading this paragraph. Can you imagine playing the lotto against such odds?

We are the lucky ones, the ones who have survived disease and war and every other threat to health and longevity. Not only did we survive, but we were born with far more opportunities than other humans who may never have had access to educational materials or good teachers. We're the lucky ones who have a chance to learn about ourselves and our world around us – to affect life for better or worse. I don't know about you, but I don't want to blow that chance. I want to learn as much as I can during my brief existence and turn that knowledge into something positive and useful for humankind.

So where was I? Ah yes...lost in happy thoughts while snorkeling in the Peace River, turning over rocks to see which ones were once a tooth to some long-dead shark, whale, crocodile or mammoth. This is the life...to play and dream and learn from such wonderful experiences.

What are we waiting for? I'll see you on the river!



Finding Peace

When I first set a hesitant foot into the Peace River, I had no idea where it originated or how long it was. That made it mysterious. I couldn't see the bottom because of the dark tannin staining the water. That made it scary. And I'd heard there were pieces of the past lying on limestone ledges, unusual animals no longer living anywhere in the world and Native American cultures gone by the wayside. That made it alluring. The Peace River was far more attractive for what I didn't know than for what I did.

I had heard rumors about the Peace River though. Legend boasted it was loaded with teeth from bus-size Megalodon sharks and dozens of other species, plus marine and terrestrial mammals as well as reptiles. When I arrived for the first time, I had my trusty mask and spit tube along, hoping to get in a little snorkeling. Perhaps if I could see the bottom, I would have a chance of uncovering some ancient paleo creature.

While I won't tell you precisely where I arrived, I will tell you that I was thrilled to finally be face-to-face with such an awesome body of water. Slowly I submersed myself into the syrupy brown water and started looking around. But something was wrong.

The bottom wasn't covered in sharks teeth. It was covered instead in green fiber that looked an awful lot like grass. Grabbing a handful, I pulled at it and brought it to the surface. Yup. Grass. Fine looking stuff too. The kind I hate to mow.

About that time, I heard a noise behind me that sounded like a human cough. I turned around to see a farmer standing over me, peering down at my handful of grass.

“Ain't from around here, are you fella?” he said.

“No sir,” I replied.

“Whatcha doin'?” he asked.

“Fossil hunting!” I replied enthusiastically.

He looked me over, then shook his head from side to side. “Ya' big dummy!” he said. “You ain't in the Peace River. You're crawlin' around in my cow pasture. This is the rainy season and the river's overflowed its banks. Even my fence is underwater. You need to come back when the water's lower!”



I apologized for accidentally trespassing and put off my next expedition until Fall when the water levels dropped.

I pass on this story so that you might help me put a stop to the ill-conceived rumors that I am some kind of paleo expert. If good at anything, it's turning everything I do into an adventure. Of course, I now know a lot more than I did before the handful of grass, but considerably less than a professional paleontologist.

Here's to my continued quest for knowledge and adventure – as well as yours – and the hope that someone may find our journeys helpful, inspiring or at the very least, entertaining!