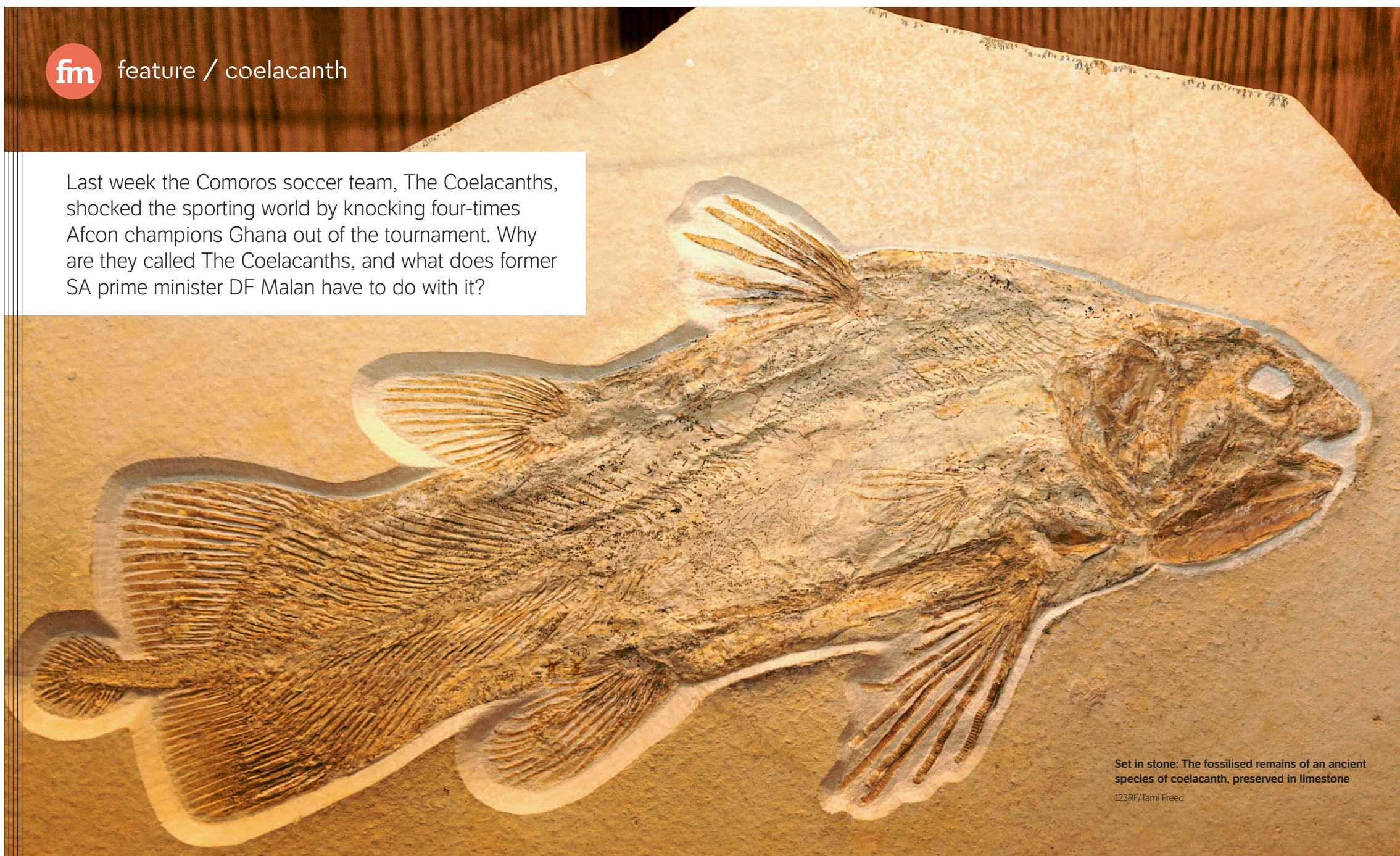


Last week the Comoros soccer team, The Coelacanths, shocked the sporting world by knocking four-times Afcon champions Ghana out of the tournament. Why are they called The Coelacanths, and what does former SA prime minister DF Malan have to do with it?



Set in stone: The fossilised remains of an ancient species of coelacanth, preserved in limestone
123RF/Tami Freed

COELACANTHS 1; APARTHEID 0

Nick Dall

On December 24 1952, the passenger ship Dunnottar Castle docked at Durban harbour. On board were ichthyologists JLB Smith and his wife, Margaret. They had just returned from a fruitful but exhausting fish-collecting mission in Kenya. Before he'd even disembarked, Smith received a telegram from East African trader Eric Hunt: "Have five-foot

specimen coelacanth injected with formalin here killed 20th Dzaoudzi Comores."

Ever since his involvement in discovering, describing and naming the first coelacanth, caught off East London in 1938, Smith had been searching for a second specimen, posting reward notices along the East African coast. The discovery of the coelacanth had catapulted Smith, and SA science, to global fame. But the 1938 specimen had been gutted by the time he saw it, and he was desperate

to get a look at the internal organs to understand more about a fish that's been around in some form for at least 400-million years.

The timing of the telegram couldn't have been worse. And there was a very real chance that the fish was either not a coelacanth at all, or too poorly preserved to be of much use.

"Any normal human being" would have allowed a local scientist in the Comoros to examine the fish and report back, says Prof Mike Bruton, the Smiths' biographer and a leading ichthyologist himself. "But not JLB ... he was convinced that this was his fish, and nothing was going to come between them."

Later that day a second telegram upped the stakes. In it Hunt explained that the French authorities were trying to claim the specimen. Hunt said he would do his utmost to keep it for the SA scientist, provided he collected it in person. Smith, who had

visions of his trophy rotting in the tropical heat, embarked on an unprecedented series of increasingly desperate phone calls from the bridge of the Dunnottar Castle.

Trying to get hold of important people over Christmas required extreme perseverance. Smith drew a blank with the head of the SA Council for Scientific & Industrial Research and cabinet ministers Eric Louw (economic affairs) and Frans Erasmus (defence). Though he did track down Eben Dönges (internal affairs), Paul Sauer (transport) and the French consul in Durban, none was of much use. No-one he spoke to was prepared to release a military plane to "take a mad scientist to a foreign country to fetch a dead fish", one journalist later said.

By Boxing Day, Smith was ready to throw caution to the wind. "I knew that we must stake all and go for [Prime Minister DF] Malan," he wrote in his book, *Old Fourlegs*. Not only was the timing terrible, but Malan was, in Smith's

words, "far away from science, very far, a reputedly dour and at one time almost sinister figure in his deeply religious stern Calvinistic righteousness".

Besides, Smith had a poor track record with prime ministers. A few years earlier he'd been refused a less complicated request by Jan Smuts – a published scientist who did believe in evolution.

"The coelacanth is an utterly incredible fish whose key characteristics have remained unchanged throughout its 420-million-year evolution," explains Bruton. "And it's taught us loads about the crucial evolutionary step from water onto land."

With the help of Vernon Shearer, the United Party MP for Durban, Smith tracked Malan down to his private holiday home in Strand, near Cape Town. At 10.30pm on Boxing Day, Shearer got

through to *Meurou* Malan, who explained that her hubby was already asleep but promised to pass on the message in the morning.

At this point Smith appears to have given up on ever being united with the fish. "Fate was screwing me down to the dregs," he wrote,

We do not use alcohol except to preserve fish

JLB Smith
"wringing out the last drops of my spirit from the rag of my being."
A few minutes later these melancholy thoughts were "shattered by the loud ringing of the telephone". Malan, it turned out, had not quite drifted into dreamland and, when *Meurou* told him about the call, he instantly recognised Smith as the author of *The Sea Fishes of Southern Africa*, which lay on his bedside table.

"The man who wrote this book would not ask my help at a time like this unless it was desperately important," he said. "I must speak to him."

And so it was that Smith and six members of the SA Air Force departed Durban at 5am on December 28 aboard Dakota 6832 – later renamed the Flying Fishcart. Malan, a former editor of *Die Burger*, knew a scoop when he saw one, and was clearly willing to put his religious convictions aside for a story that could provide great PR for the unpopular apartheid government.

After refuelling in Lourenço Marques (Maputo) and overnighting in Lumbo in northern Mozambique, the Fishcart finally set out for the island of Pamanzi (the access point to tiny Dzaoudzi), where it hoped to land on an airstrip built by SA troops during World War 2.

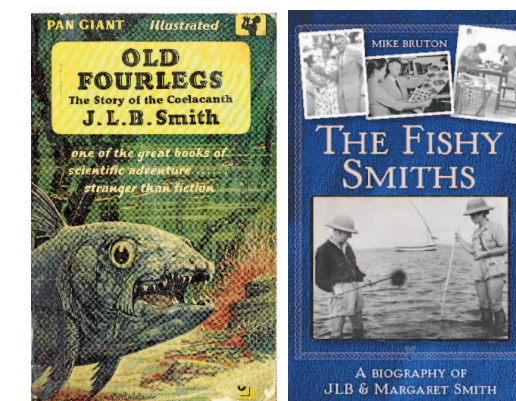
After a bumpy landing, Smith was greeted by Hunt and a bevy of French officials. "Where's the fish?" he blurted. "On my boat," replied Hunt.

Smith wanted to go straight there, but Hunt insisted they first pay the governor a visit. As Smith wrote: "I have often suffered from the necessity of paying tribute to officialdom, but this was probably the hardest I have ever endured. It was agony and torture ... I had not ... come so far to exchange polite words with a governor."

Smith did his best to be civil, but when the governor's wife took him to a table "laden with bottles and dainties of all kinds", he could take it no more. He explained, as gently as he could, that he would inspect the fish first and feast later.

A few minutes later Smith finally got to see the fish for himself. "God, yes! It was true! I saw the first unmistakable tubercles on the large scales, then the bones of the head, the spiny fins. It was true! Malan would not suffer for his action, thank God for that! It was a coelacanth all right."

Smith wept tears of joy. As his emotions subsided, he noticed that the



Show and tell: JLB Smith shows the second coelacanth specimen to DF Malan in Strand, December 1952 Images courtesy of the SA Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity / NRF-SAIAB and Mike Bruton



On the hunt: JLB Smith (centre front), Eric Hunt (far left) and the crew of the SA Air Force Dakota 6832 (above); JLB Smith's reward poster (right) Images courtesy of the SA Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity / NRF-SAIAB

fish had no first dorsal fin and no “extra little tail as all coelacanths have had”. This led him to believe it was a new species.

Smith's first instinct was to honour the two people who had been instrumental in obtaining the specimen by calling the species *Malania hunti*. Hunt, however, felt this might anger the French, and suggested the name *Malania anjouanae* to pay homage, too, to the place where it had been caught.

After briefly showing face at the governor's residence – the sight of an enormous chocolate cake made Smith's “liver throb” – the South Africans rushed to the airstrip with their precious cargo.

Not long after taking off, the crew played a prank on Smith, telling him a squadron of French fighter planes was on its way to intercept the Dakota. He was undeterred: “I'm not giving up my coelacanth,” he said. “And I don't believe they'd shoot us down if we refused to turn back.”

After an epic 12-hour journey, the Flying Fishcart eventually touched down at the Durban aerodrome. As the clock approached midnight, an exhausted Smith gave an impromptu 45-minute radio interview,



which one listener described as “one of the most moving broadcasts it has ever been my privilege to hear”.

For the benefit of the apartheid government, he then repeated the entire interview in Afrikaans.

After spending the night in Durban (with the coelacanth next to his bed), Smith awoke, determined to show the fish to Malan. He persuaded the pilot to pick up Margaret and their son William (of *The Learning Channel* fame) in what was then Grahamstown. Though the pilot said a woman had never been allowed to fly on an air force plane, he relented because “everything about this flight has been highly irregular”.



Well travelled: The Flying Fishcart Image courtesy Mike Bruton

After taking another detour to swoop over the Knysna house where Smith's other son was holidaying – and drop a plank (attached to a parachute) bearing a message explaining that he was taking the coelacanth to Malan – the Dakota finally turned towards Cape Town.

Upon landing at Ysterplaat, the Smiths and their fish were driven to Malan's holiday home, where Smith was offered whisky – something the teetotal Malan seemed to have sourced especially for the occasion.

“We do not use alcohol except to preserve fish,” explained the scientist politely.

When the coffin containing the fish was eventually opened, Malan the anti-evolutionist remarked: “My, it is ugly! Do you mean to say we once looked like that?”

Smith then gave Malan a scale from the fish and posed for photos with the prime minister. After a nap in the Malans' spare room, Smith showed the fish to hundreds of distinguished guests who'd been summoned from all over the southwestern Cape.

Writing about the experience, Smith showed willful blindness to the harm caused by apartheid. “After that day of intimate contact we left the Strand knowing that behind the solemn, stony face of the newspapers lay a warm humanity and an active if dry sense of humour ... Back at Ysterplaat my wife put into words what had been filling my mind; she said: ‘That man could do no wrong to anyone.’”

The next morning Smith got the pilot of the Fishcart to break one last rule on the flight home. As the plane swooped low over Malan's residence, Smith dropped the morning papers into his garden, all bearing news of the prime minister's incredible foresight and generosity.

While the Smiths' opinions of Malan left a lot to be desired, science was not as easily bluffed. In 1953 it was revealed that the Comoros coelacanth was not, after all, a separate species (the missing fins were the result of a shark attack), and the name *Malania anjouanae* fell away.

Coelacanths I; apartheid 0. ✕