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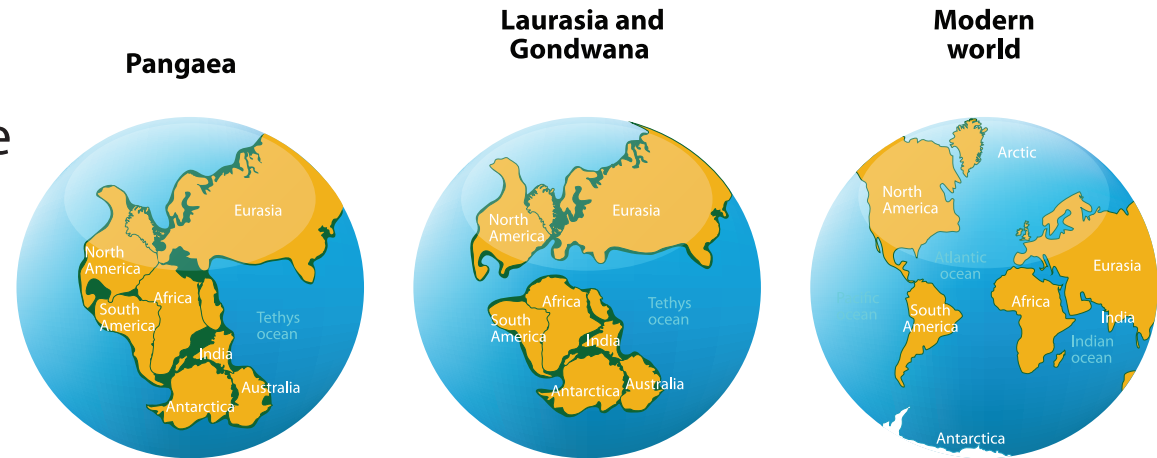


Why do most marsupials live in Australia?

Many animals belong to the marsupial family. The majority of species live in Australia but some are native to South America and parts of North America. Some also live in habitats north of Australia in countries such as Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.

Scientists believe that the continents of Australia, South America and Antarctica were once joined in a large continent referred to as Gondwana. They believe that the marsupials were separated as the continents drifted apart 180 million years ago.

Land connections existed millions of years ago between Australia and the islands to the north. When sea levels rose the animals became stranded.



North American Opossum. The only marsupial species native to North America.

Kangaroos and Koalas

Most people are familiar with two marsupials that have become symbols of Australia: the koala and the kangaroo.

What do these two animals have in common? Why are they classed as marsupials?

Like all mammals, marsupials are furry and feed their babies milk. But the one feature that makes them different from other mammals is that they have a pouch for their young.

Marsupial babies are deaf, blind and hairless when they are born. They can be as small as a grain of rice or as big as a peanut. They crawl through their mother's fur to the pouch where they stay until they are fully developed.



Marsupial Species

There are over 330 different species of marsupials living in the world today. Most of them live in Australia and the nearby islands to the north of Australia.

Marsupials were the dominant animals in Australia prior to European settlement. Unfortunately, the population of many species of marsupials declined with the introduction of non-native animals. Some are now extinct or threatened as a direct result of human impact.

There are currently more than 20 species of marsupials in Australia that are endangered. The major factors in their population decline are habitat loss and predation by introduced animals such as foxes and feral cats.



Tasmanian Devil



Brushtailed Possum



Agile Wallaby

Extinct Species

Australia's largest carnivorous marsupial, the thylacine (Tasmanian tiger,) once lived across the mainland of Australia as well as on the island of Tasmania. It is most likely that the mainland population decreased and due to competition from the Dingo which was introduced 3-4 thousand years ago.

The population of Tasmanian thylacines was wiped out as a result of over-hunting by Europeans. The last known thylacine died in Hobart Zoo in 1936. No thylacines sightings have been recorded since then and it is assumed the species is now extinct.

There are 27 species of mammals and 22 species of birds that have gone extinct in Australia. Most of the mammals that appear in these lists are marsupials or native rodents.



European settlers hunted thylacines to protect their farming interests. The Government at the time offered a cash reward for every thylacine killed.