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Bees Went Extinct 65 Million Years Ago Just Like Dinosaurs Did

New research has confirmed what bee scientists have long suspected.

By Ben Wolford on October 25, 2013 5:30 PM EDT



New research finds that bees went extinct at the same time dinosaurs did. Whatever it was that nipped the dinosaurs 65 million years ago seems to have taken down the bees, too.

People who study bees, melittologists, had a feeling bees got wiped out in the global die-off, given the documented evidence of a widespread flowering plant extinction around the same time. But new [research](#) by scientists in New Hampshire and Australia has confirmed it for sure: The bees weren't spared.

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"Understanding extinctions and the effects of declines in the past can help us understand the pollinator decline and the global crisis in pollinators today," said Sandra Rehan, a bee scientist at the [University of New Hampshire](#). Unlike enormous lizards, tiny ancient bee fossils don't preserve very well, and that's always been a problem for researchers trying to learn about their past, says Michael Schwarz of [Flinders University](#). He and Rehan found a way to get around that, though. It's called molecular



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phylogenetics, a branch of evolutionary biology that looks at DNA structures.

The basic idea is that scientists can timestamp genetic mutations and map out the evolutionary sequences that gave us species diversity. In this case, they looked at 230 species of carpenter bees from every continent but Antarctica. With what little fossil evidence they do have (they've got a bunch of bees preserved in amber dating to 45 million years ago, but not much else), the researchers lined up a clear story of the life and times of bees.

"The data told us something major was happening in four different groups of bees at the same time," Rehan says. "And it happened to be the same time as the dinosaurs went extinct." That kind of wipeout would have dramatically affected the way bees, and flowering plants, evolved. These days, bees are struggling again, leaving flowering plants again in the lurch.

Bees have been dying off in Europe and North America, beekeepers say, at a rate of [30 percent or more](#) for the last decade, a phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder. Much of the food we eat depends on pollinators. This year, the European Union [outlawed the use of a kind of pesticide](#) thought to weaken bees' immune systems. Some groups in the United States [sued the Environmental Protection Agency](#) to try to ban the same pesticide, called neonicotinoids.

The researchers in the bee extinction study hope their new information will help inspire greater care for bees.

"Given current concerns about looming potential losses in diversity of pollinating insects in general, and bees in particular," they wrote, "it is becoming important to understand how pollinators responded to global perturbations in the past and what the future short-term and long-term consequences for plant-pollinator relationships might be."

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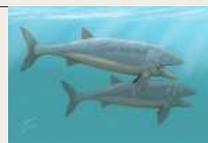
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