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EVOLUTION AND EARLY HISTORY

Australia – a lush subtropical forest

Wombats are ancient animals. Marsupials – the pouched mammals, of which the wombat is one – evolved about 100 million years ago, but the Australian fossil record is woefully sparse. The oldest known marsupial fossils are about 24 million years old, but very little is known about the early marsupials until the period that began about 15 million years ago. At that time, when much of Australia, including the now arid centre, was covered by lush subtropical forest, wombat-like marsupials were roaming the forest floor. Dolphins played in large freshwater lakes that spread over large areas of what is now central Australia. In the region we call the Simpson Desert, the trees were the homes of possums, gliders and koalas, while small rabbit-sized kangaroos hopped along the gullies, and large lion-sized carnivorous marsupials, *Thylacaleo*, hunted their prey.

These animals were the ancestors of the ones we know today, and although not enough fossils have yet been found to establish a complete