

Mass Extinction, Narrative Closure, and Evidence

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The finding by David Raup and Jack Sepkoski that mass extinctions as reflected in the fossil record exhibit a 26.2 million year periodicity, coupled with the discovery by the Alvarez research group of an iridium anomaly coinciding with the mass extinction of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous period had a transformative effect on the epistemology of the paleontology of extinction. Linking periodicity with a possible extraterrestrial cause for mass extinction altered the narrative from one of temporal sequence to one of temporal cyclicity. The most fruitful way to characterize the resulting transformed epistemology is that the search for evidence, and the cessation of the search for evidence, is best explained as the pursuit of closure for the overarching narrative of cyclical causation of extinction.