



Building a dynamic destination

Developing sustainable summer tourism in Outback Queensland

- The Minister for Tourism Industry Development and Innovation and Minister for Sport, the Honourable Stirling Hinchliffe, has officially opened the Museum's latest large-scale infrastructure project.
- The project includes the relocation and conservation of Australia's best-preserved sauropod dinosaur tracksite, now housed in the *March of the Titanosaurs* exhibition, and the Gondwana Stars Observatory.
- Funded by a Queensland government grant, the Dynamic Destination project will act as a catalyst for future economic development in the summer tourism market.

Today the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum (the Museum) officially opened the Dynamic Destination project. The project consists of the *March of the Titanosaurs* exhibition, Gondwana Stars Observatory and two life-sized bronze sauropods accompanied by several ornithopods and coelurosaurs. The Dynamic Destination project forms part of the Museum's comprehensive and wide-ranging visitor experiences, which will culminate with construction of the main Museum of Natural History building.

Visitors take a journey through deep time, to learn from the past in the skies above them and from the tracks of the animals that walked ancient Winton, 95 million years ago.

Background

In 2019 the Museum was awarded \$4.9 million through the Queensland Government's Growing Tourism Infrastructure Fund to complete the Dynamic Destination project. While the Museum had committed to contribute \$733,000 towards the project, in 2020, following delays in construction and cash flow shortages because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Queensland Government waived the Museum's remaining contributions.

David Elliott, Executive Chairman of Australian Age of Dinosaurs Ltd, and his family have project managed construction of the new facilities. "There are two really important and immediate outcomes to the Dynamic Destination project: the first is the preservation of the 54-metre-long tracksite that conserves a moment in time from Winton's distant past and the second is the impact this project will have on tourism in Outback Queensland," said Mr Elliott. "The long-term drought in western Queensland coupled with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 make catalyst projects such as the Dynamic Destination project even more necessary to kick-start regional sustainability and instigate the growth required for western Queensland to be international-tourism ready."

While funding was awarded in 2019 the project commenced a year earlier in 2018 when the Museum began to excavate and relocate the 54-metre-long tracksite discovered on a station just outside Winton. It was decided to relocate the tracksite because floodwaters changed their course and began to severely degrade the exposed tracks. Over three years the entire tracksite, weighing over 300 tonnes, was relocated to The Jump-Up and is now permanently housed in the *March of the Titanosaurs* exhibition. "It was definitely a relief to finally get the tracksite onsite," said Mr Elliott, who has been working tirelessly with his wife, Judy, and other workers to relocate the tracksite. "Now

that we have a purpose-built facility to house the tracks and a critical mass of attractions at Dinosaur Canyon, it will be relatively easy to expand our tourist offering,” he said. “We’ve been working non-stop to get this finished and we are finally there.”

The idea of an Australian natural history museum began following David Elliott's chance discovery of a giant sauropod femur in 1999. Commencing in 2002 the not-for-profit Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum was stationed in a makeshift fossil preparation laboratory in a shed on the Elliott's property until 2009 when it moved to a new purpose-built science and tourism operation located on a 1,400-hectare mesa 24km south-east of Winton. Mr Elliott admits he “...never dreamed in those early days that it would end up where it is.”

“The Museum has amassed Australia’s most comprehensive collection of large dinosaur bones in little more than a decade which, from a scientific point of view, is outstanding. However, from a regional economy point of view, it is imperative that we interpret these discoveries into a popular tourism product,” he said.

The Museum includes the most productive Fossil Preparation Laboratory in the Southern Hemisphere, a multi-award-winning Reception Centre and fossil Collection Room, and multiple attractions at Dinosaur Canyon, including the new exhibition and observatory opening today. The Museum has also been actively involved in the scientific publication of its new fossil discoveries including the fossil bones of Australia’s most complete Cretaceous sauropods, *Diamantinasaurus matildae* and *Savannasaurus elliottorum*. Australia’s most complete theropod dinosaur, *Australovenator wintonensis*, and flying reptile *Ferrodraco lentoni* were also found by the Museum and now reside in the Museum’s Collection Room.

“These new attractions are beginning to draw more and more visitors to Winton,” said Winton Shire Council Mayor, Gavin Baskett. “The integrity behind the exhibition, science and product that is being delivered is incredible and it is truly a great drawcard for Winton,” said Mayor Baskett.

The *March of the Titanosaurs* exhibition

The tracksite was first discovered on Karoola Station by property owner Mike Elliott in 2000 when floodwaters changed the course of Snake Creek. While Mike recognised several small footprints, he didn’t initially recognise the large impressions as sauropod footprints. But, as the Museum excavation commenced in 2018, Mike reasoned that “...because of the sauropod bones that had been found in the region, these were likely their tracks.”

The tracksite was professionally surveyed prior to its relocation. The survey data was used to build a compacted gravel pad at Dinosaur Canyon to the exact specifications and orientation of the original site and to replace the fossilised footprints exactly as they had been. Relocation of the tracksite began in earnest in September 2018 and continued for three years. The footprint layer, preserved as hard rock, was dismantled along existing cracks and moved in sections in a two-tonne trailer. As each section was removed at the site, it was loaded into the trailer and brought to the Museum where it was then refitted (in reverse) to the sections already in place.

The tracksite depicts animals that were not threatened at the time, just strolling through the silt at a steady walking (or casual swimming or punting) pace. When the tracksite was covered with shallow water the traces left by crocodiles and turtles suggest that they were buoyed up in the water column but touching down on the silt to keep themselves moving. The sauropod trackways imply that they were social – living, or at least sometimes moving, in groups (possibly herds).

Bronze dinosaur sculptures

The two life-sized bronze sauropods that guard the entrance to the *March of the Titanosaurs* exhibition are modelled on *Diamantinasaurus matildae*. These sauropods are 17m and 10m long and were cast in bronze by Thai Metal Crafters in Thailand from 3D-printed model files created by palaeo-artist Travis Tischler. On the concrete entrance plinth to the *March of the Titanosaurs*

exhibition, two small bronze ornithopods and several tiny coelurosaurs greet visitors as they walk into the building.

Gondwana Stars Observatory

In 2019 The Jump-Up, the site of the Museum, was designated Australia's first International Dark-Sky Sanctuary because of its extraordinarily clear and dark skies. The Gondwana Stars Observatory is a raised open-topped building that will encourage visitors to participate in evening tourism experiences, particularly during the summer season, to see the spectacular night sky. The observatory is made of concrete tilt panels, rendered to resemble a huge meteorite in a crater. Its concrete viewing deck includes concrete seating, large telescopes and a storage room.

Conclusion

As part of today's celebration the Honourable Stirling Hinchliffe MP officially opened the project with other key supporters and contributors. "The reality is the discoveries and the story represented here, have made a world famous attraction. It is a testament to David and his family's passion. The Palaszczuk government has been very pleased to invest \$4.9 million to support the development of the Dynamic Destination project."

"We have been able to see a lot more value delivered in that \$4.9 million that you might see on any number of other given projects because of the passion, commitment and the personal hands-on work that David and his family have done," said Mr Hinchliffe. "The construction supported 16 jobs and six ongoing jobs, once it is fully operational. This is a great contribution to our recovery in this part of Queensland," he added.

Around 300 people from across the region and interstate attended the official opening events and to be the first visitors through the new attractions. Mr Hinchliffe concluded, "As Tourism Minister it is a very proud moment to be part of opening a world-class museum here in Winton. Winton is the place to be."