

Inquiry into ways to foster and promote the significance of Australia's national capital

A proposed Australian Centre for Natural History

Summary

- The Terms Of Reference for this inquiry cover a range of issues relating to Canberra as the national capital including the national institutions
- Five years ago the Joint Standing Committee called for submissions to an inquiry into Canberra's national institutions. I made a submission to the inquiry proposing the development of a natural history centre (or museum) in Canberra
- In 2019 the Committee produced a report from the inquiry which recommended that the Government develop a business case for the establishment of a natural history museum in Canberra. (Recommendation Number 12).
- This submission restates the case for a natural history centre (or museum) in Canberra. A long term commitment to establish such a national institution with a clearly defined process is urgently needed

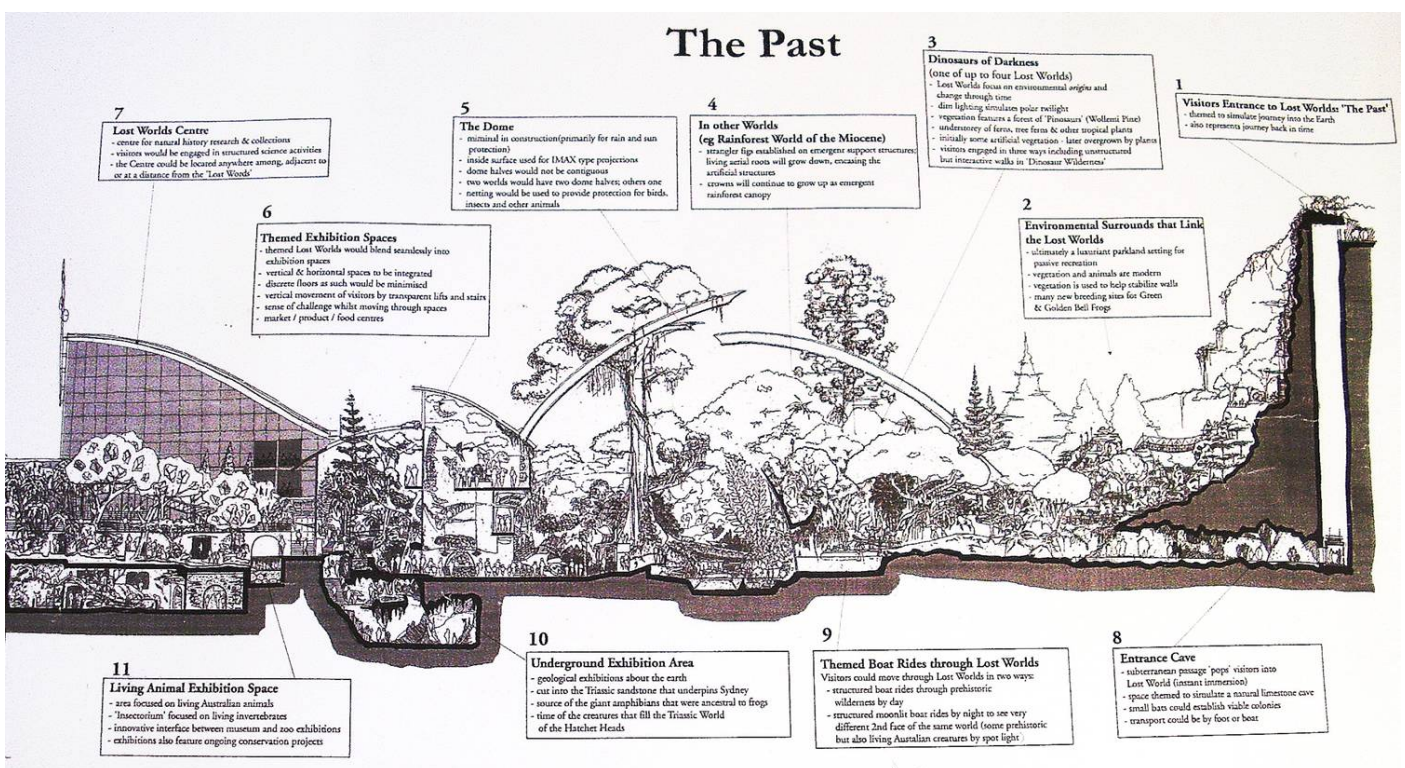
Background

- Millions of years of isolation have made Australia's lands and wildlife fundamentally different from other continents. This distinction has created and sculpted Australia into what she is today.
- Our natural history is unique and yet there is no national institution that tells this story of our past, our present environment and, most importantly, what we must learn for the future.
- Other countries with a far less interesting and important natural history eg United Kingdom, America have national institutions that focus solely on this topic. Given its significance to Australia, surely it is time to establish such an institution.
- With the impact of climate change already being felt across the country, we need to take action on several fronts to protect the animals and plants that make Australia special. This proposal is just one of these initiatives.
- This is not a new proposal. Such an institution has been proposed many times over many years and there is no reason why it should not happen.

One concept for a Natural History Centre

- This particular concept was first developed back in the early 1990s by Professor Mike Archer at the University of New South Wales proposing a National Centre for his work on the Riversleigh World Heritage fossil project and the evolution of Australia's unique fauna.
- Professor Archer was also on the Council of the National Museum of Australia (NMA) and based on his research and ideas, promoted the concept of 'Messages from the Past; Lessons for the Future'. These concepts and ideas were taken on board by the NMA in a very broad sense.
- A further iteration of this concept was the 'Alcheringa Project' – a 'New Australian Museum' project centred on Sydney's Olympic Park at Homebush Bay. Professor Archer spearheaded this project when he was Director of the Australian Museum (A NSW State Government Museum) in 1999.

- There are three components to this proposal :
 1. Lost Worlds-focusing on and interacting with Australia's fascinating past (Concept sketch below – I do have the large scale original of this small image)
 2. Living Worlds-focusing on Australia's living environments and creatures
 3. Future Worlds-focusing on a sustainable future
- These are the past, present and future of Australian environments and the inseparable links between the three. It is vital that we learn from the past to understand the present in order to ensure the future.
- Attempting the last without comprehending the first is why Australia is losing species at a rate not seen since the extinction of the dinosaurs, why the continent faces unsustainable losses in land degradation costs, and why rural & regional Australia is in danger of losing its future. Educating, researching and meeting these challenges would be the focus and purpose of the proposal
- Regrettably the NSW State Government did not proceed with funding for Alcheringa



Why Canberra?

- Canberra, as the nation's capital, and Australia need exciting, new, iconic national institutions that tell the story about Australia and how the country has evolved over time that attract and educate both international and national visitors in large numbers
- Australia does not have a national institution that focuses on Australia's natural history and the environment
- Australia needs an environmentally-focused national institution that weaves together the past, present and importantly the future of both urban and rural/regional Australia

- A Centre for Natural History could link with other national institutions based in Canberra
- The Centre could house important national collections such as CSIRO's National Herbarium, National Insect Collection and National Wildlife Collection and also the National Mineral and Fossil Collection of Geoscience Australia
- It could also have links with other related Canberra natural history attractions such as the National Rock Garden and the Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary
- Modern institutions from around the world utilise relevant and exciting formats using new technologies that attract and inspire visitors. The Centre has the potential to be such a world class institution

Benefits: short and long-term

Key benefits would be:

- Raising awareness of Australia's special plants and animals and how they will be impacted by devastating impact of climate change
- An innovative and diverse complex or complexes that will attract increased national and international tourism to Canberra
- A national institution based in Canberra but with links throughout Australia focused on tackling environmental issues vital to the future of Australia, particularly rural and regional Australia where many small museums focus on Australia's past (Lost Worlds)
- These museums include as diverse as Mt Isa, Murgon and Winton in Queensland, Lightning Ridge and Canowindra in New South Wales and Naracoorte Caves in South Australia
- A multi-faceted project that will unite the research and educational strengths of Australia's environmentally - focused institutions, both Government and non-Government