

The Australian Centre for Natural History

Summary

The Terms Of Reference for The Inquiry refer to the process for establishing new national institutions. There are, no doubt, several proposals for new institutions which showcase Australia. This proposal for a Natural History Centre in Canberra is just one of them. A clearly defined process would be of great benefit to proponents and would also help the Government in determining priorities for any new developments.

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 and 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 Britain, America have National Institutions that focus solely on this topic. Given its significance to Australia, surely it is time to establish such an Institution.

This particular concept was first developed back in the mid 1980s 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.

The proposal was refined and expanded in 1990 to the concept of a Centre to study the evolution of Australia's fauna and its value in understanding and conserving the environment.

At about this time, Professor Archer was 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.

Another iteration of this concept was the 'Alcheringa Project' – a 'New Australian Museum' project centred on Sydney's Olympic Park. Professor Archer spearheaded this project when he was Director of the Australian Museum (A NSW State Government Museum) in 1999.

The Proposal

There are three components to this proposal for a new National Institution based in Canberra, which is based on The Alcheringa Project at the Olympic site at Homebush Bay in Sydney:

- Lost Worlds-focusing on and interacting with Australia's fascinating past
- Living Worlds-focusing on Australia's living environments and creatures
- 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.

Associated with these components could be commercial developments that would contribute revenue to offset operational costs of the whole project.

Lost Worlds - focusing on and interacting with Australia's fascinating past

The last 200 million years of extraordinary Australia could be recreated as four realistic worlds. Walking trails and a winding navigable waterway would unite the Worlds which would be filled with 'prehistoric' living plants (e.g., Wollemi 'Dinosaur' Pines for a Dinosaur World), reconstructed as well as related living animals, and technological devices. Collectively, these will immerse visitors in the experience that they will be forming personal memories about being actually stalked by dinosaurs or a 7 metre carnivorous lizard of the kind that faced Australia's first human inhabitants.

Individual Lost World Components: Each Lost World would have: 1, a very large central area of recreated prehistoric world-the Lost World itself; 2, a zone filled with living, free-ranging Australian animals appropriate to each particular world; 3, peripheral interactive displays; 4, shops and family-focused activity centres. The Lost Worlds Centre would be a strikingly iconic building, blended into its surrounds, containing exhibitions about the prehistoric treasures of Australia.

Comment. PricewaterhouseCooper concluded that for the 'Lost Worlds' portion of the original Alcheringa Project based in Sydney, and developed in conjunction with the corporate sector, could well be financially self-sufficient depending on the amount of time it engaged visitors. A similar conclusion was reached by Ernst & Young.

Living Worlds - focusing on Australia's living environments and creatures.

Depending on the location, this world could be set in a living ecosystem which would provide opportunities for interactive interpretation and a basis for research programs. Conservation projects focused on endangered plants and animals would provide supervised activities for school groups, the general public, tourists and research staff.

Future Worlds - focusing on a sustainable future.

This world would be an educational, research and display centre. It could also be the centre for programs focused on rural and regional areas. Depending on location, areas opportunities could be provided to showcase examples of sustainable land-use practices.

Why Canberra?

- The Nation's Capital and Australia need exciting, new, iconic 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
- The Centre For Natural History could link with other National Institutions based in Canberra, such as CSIRO who have also proposed a Natural History Museum

- The Centre could house important national collections such as CSIRO's National Insect Collection and National Wildlife Collection and also the Commonwealth Palaeontological Collection.
- Cooperative partnerships between Government cultural/environmental institutions and the corporate sector will broaden the effectiveness of all of these organisations
- Modern institutions of this type around the world need leadership to envision relevant and exciting formats that attract and inspire visitors

Possible Locations in Canberra

Ideally all the three components would be located adjacent to each other but this is not essential. Different components could be located throughout Canberra but with the necessary links between them. Possible locations could include:

- The Acton Peninsula in association with the National Museum of Australia
- The Yarramundi area at the western end of Lake Burley Griffin in association with the National Zoo, the Arboretum and the National Rock Garden. Specific locations could include the Lindsay Pryor Arboretum adjacent to the National Rock Garden or the old quarries near the top of Dairy Farmer's Hill at the Arboretum.
- The Mulligan's Flat Woodland Sanctuary which focusses on reintroduction of endangered plants & animals (e.g., Bettongs), formally common in the ACT, and would provide supervised interactive activities for school groups, the general public, tourists and research staff from many of the ACT's research and educational institutions such as CSIRO and ANU.
- The old Brickworks quarry at Yarralumla but there are development plans for this site.

Benefits: short and long-term

Key benefits would be:

- An innovative and diverse complex or complexes that will attract national and international tourism
- 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)
- A multi-faceted project that will unite the research & educational strengths of Australia's environmentally - focused institutions, both Government and non-Government

Comparable development elsewhere in the world

We are not aware of any similar institution anywhere in the world and we believe that such an innovative and diverse project will attract national and international tourism as well as tackling environmental issues vital to the future of Australia.