



COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr A Tantari MP—Chair
Mr SA Bennett MP
Mr RCJ Skelton MP

Staff present:

Ms L Pretty—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE PREHISTORIC DINOSAUR AND PALAEO TOURISM IN OUTBACK QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Monday, 27 May 2024

Quilpie

MONDAY, 27 MAY 2024

The subcommittee met at 1.30 pm.

CHAIR: Good afternoon. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into prehistoric dinosaur and palaeo tourism in Outback Queensland. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose lands, winds and waters we all share. My name is Adrian Tantari. I am the member for Hervey Bay and chair of the committee. With me here today is a subcommittee of our committee which includes Mr Stephen Bennett, the member for Burnett and deputy chair, and Mr Robert Skelton, the member for Nicklin.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. These proceedings are being recorded by our Hansard reporter and will be published on the parliament's website. If you have any concerns about this, please talk to our committee secretary. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Please turn your mobile phones off or to silent.

BARNES, Ms Lyn, Councillor, Quilpie Shire Council

HALL, Mr Ben, Mayor, Quilpie Shire Council

CHAIR: Good afternoon. Would you like to make an opening statement before we start our questions?

Ms Barnes: Thank you very much for this opportunity. We all are very grateful that the parliamentary inquiry has come to Quilpie. I was thinking long and hard about what to say today. Thinking about the many benefits of the creation of a palaeo tourism trail, I realised that there would be speakers with far more knowledge of scientific tourism and the actual science of palaeontology than myself. I was discussing this around the camp fire last night with visiting friends at our beautiful Lake Houdraman, which has firmly established itself as one of the 'must camp at' spots on the Outback Queensland tourism trail. Thinking that every speaker today will outline the many reasons for a palaeo trail—how it will be of enormous economic, educational and cultural benefit to Queensland tourism, if not Australian tourism—I asked the question: what more could there be to argue the case for a palaeo trail? One of my fireside friends, who is here today, came up with the suggestion of what could happen if we did not seize the opportunity to establish a palaeo tourism trail in Queensland and what would be the negative consequences. That is a novel way to approach a proposition: what if, with the current huge interest in natural history, predominantly with dinosaurs and the emergence of a number of attractions throughout Outback Queensland, we did not build on the hard work of the locals, volunteers and scientists to establish linkages through these places of discovery to create an experience worthy of global interest?

I am the operator of an art gallery, and this puts me in daily contact with the travelling public. It seems to me that our current palaeo tourism attractions are developing as individual entities with little relationship to one another. When I mention to my visitors that the Eromanga Natural History Museum is the home of Australia's largest dinosaur and only an hour from Quilpie, many visitors express surprise and say, 'Oh, we've already seen the dinosaurs at Winton.' Quite often when I have successfully persuaded them to take a look at Eromanga, they will return to me grateful for the experience of a different palaeo offering. If we do not establish a palaeo trail linking our attractions, we run the risk of lumping all of our excellent and diverse natural history offerings into the 'seen one, seen them all' category.

As people like Robyn Mackenzie and her team can attest, the world of palaeontology is fluid, with new detections of species—from the monsters of the universe like *Australotitan cooperensis* to the tiniest amoeba-like creatures. As these discoveries are being made right throughout what could be called the potential palaeo trail—Eromanga, Winton, Hughenden, Richmond et cetera—there are

also shires throughout Queensland beginning to recognise their rich natural history. Just last week a councillor from the Western Downs told me of a trove of diprotodon bones near Chinchilla. Quite possibly, a palaeo trail would encourage participation on a smaller scale than the laboratories at Eromanga and Winton, but without the presence of a pathway people in places such as Chinchilla might not make that step.

It is a daunting task to create a standalone palaeo experience, but if you know that there are others you can rely on and a trail to assist you I think that would be extremely valuable. In many facets of our public and private lives, how many times do we say, 'I wish we'd done this years ago'? Through technology and media, humans are now more informed about the history of our planet than ever before. The presence of entire TV channels dedicated to all things palaeo attest to the curiosity about and the passion for the origins of life. Children are captivated by the world of dinosaurs, possibly more than their grandparents, who were entranced by pirates or cowboys.

Whilst palaeo tourism has been around for a long time, palaeo trails are only just starting to be mapped out. When googling 'palaeo tourism' which means, according to Google, 'hands-on interaction with fossils', the results are mostly from South Africa and from our own outback, with some mention of palaeo hiking trails in California.

If we do not establish a dedicated palaeo trail for our Queensland scientific attractions, we run the risk of not capturing the momentum that is currently evident. We all know that it is a long haul to create something worthwhile. Look at the 20th anniversary of the discovery of the first dinosaur bone on Plevna; that is a good illustration. These types of tourist trail experiences sometimes grow organically, like the USA's Route 66 or Egypt's Nile cruises. You would not dream of just doing three pyramids and a sphinx; you would continue your journey to Abu Simbel and Luxor. All of these things are related but slightly different. This leads us to the question: if a palaeo trail linking our rich palaeo tourism offerings is not embraced, how do we promote the uniqueness of each experience with their differing species of dinosaurs, megafauna, flora and fauna? We have not even mentioned geology. It is better to work together, don't you think?

CHAIR: Thank you, Councillor Barnes. That was a very informative opening statement. No doubt, members will have a lot of questions for you.

Mr BENNETT: Good afternoon. In terms of the palaeo trail we are talking about, what do you think is needed? Across the road you have a good depiction of what the trail could look like—the loop. What are you actually asking or what do you suggest a trail would look like in reality?

Ms Barnes: In this situation, a lot of infrastructure has already been put there. It is probably intense marketing and promotion. Obviously extra infrastructure will be needed—and perhaps we can be enlightened a little bit further when we hear from the director of the Eromanga Natural History Museum—but, at this point now, we could start a palaeo trail tomorrow because there are enough quality offerings to get it off the ground. Hopefully with the infrastructure that we need at Eromanga, the finishing of the Eromanga Natural History Museum, that will be brought even closer as people see the value in that.

Mr BENNETT: Some tourism figures have been thrown around: 135,000 or 150,000 visitors a year are currently attributed to some sort of palaeo tourism in Outback Queensland. What other issues will we have to deal with if we start to really capitalise on what will be an increasing market share?

Ms Barnes: Our neighbouring shire to the south, Bulloo shire, is currently trying to upgrade what we call the Warri Gate Road. That road will open up the south to our south-west corner and to Queensland quicker than, say, the known routes. It is bitumen now from Broken Hill to the Queensland border, so something like opening up the Warri Gate Road will immediately give people access to the palaeo trail at Eromanga. That is possibly something that would be a vital link.

Mr Hall: And then onto the central north as a lead-in to part of that trail.

Ms Barnes: Yes, continuing north from there.

Mr BENNETT: I am wondering about the regional tourism organisations. On the east coast where I come from, we have the Bundaberg Burnett tourism group and Gladstone has GAPDL et cetera. Are they fragmented here as well? Is that what I am hearing? Does Winton have a different representative tourism board as opposed to what Quilpie and Eromanga have?

Mr Hall: They are operating individually in their own silos. That is the key issue, and this is predominantly to bring together some sort of coalition.

Mr BENNETT: What are those groups?

Mr Hall: They are their own individual entities.

Mr SKELTON: Palaeo tourism is definitely a huge thing. My seven-year-old wanted to hide in my suitcase when I told him I was coming out to Eromanga. I said, 'I don't think the government would like that too much, mate.' The mayor touched on the fact that we need to get the different shires and organisations under an umbrella, as well as the extensive marketing and infrastructure. What do you think the government can do to get all these people in the room?

Mr Hall: We currently have initiatives that take school groups to Canberra, the capital of Australia, for all those sorts of things. We do not have anything like that opening up our region; we do not have any subsidised schemes that open up those sorts of things. There is that under the banner of education.

Mr SKELTON: So there could be some sort of input from Education Queensland to bring kids out to the regions for camps?

Mr Hall: Yes.

Mr SKELTON: They do camps already in the east so it could be something similar.

Mr Hall: They are subsidised, the campgrounds. I have been through them with my kids to Apex and things like that. We do not have anything like that out here. We are building the infrastructure. We have the infrastructure here to support those groups. It may need a bit of fine-tuning, but there is private sector backing to do that.

Mr SKELTON: So promotion through schools and saying, 'This is what's available.' That is good.

Ms Barnes: Another possibility to get people working together would be someone with, say, the imprimatur of the Minister for Tourism calling the groups together and saying, 'We're thinking about a palaeo trail. What are your thoughts?' I have people arrive at my gallery and they have been to Winton and never heard of Eromanga. It started off within our tourism region. Our tourism officers are telling people all along the way from Toowoomba west: 'Go to Miles. You'll have a great experience in Miles. From Miles to Roma, you'll have a great experience.' Ben was talking about that silo mentality within the individual institutions, and I think that is something that our visitor centres are working through but not our individual organisations, and perhaps Eromanga will prove me wrong with this. As an outsider of the palaeo thing, I feel that those individuals like Eromanga, Winton, Richmond and Hughenden—the people who are directly involved with the dinosaurs—do not seem to have a lot of interaction.

Mr SKELTON: With each other?

Ms Barnes: Yes.

CHAIR: This is the second part of the inquiry. I was most fortunate to be on the committee the inquiry came from, the then Economics and Governance Committee. I was able to see the trail up north, and you talk about a trail and what that means. Some of the witnesses at those hearings indicated that the establishment of a trail up there in their own right created a greater dynamic for the industry, and obviously they are going ahead well. It is interesting to hear you talk about a trail, which is vitally important as a collective to work together.

From a state perspective—and I am not talking out of turn here—that is a great idea to try to get this all together. One of the recommendations coming from the committee when we assess the hearings could be that there needs to be, like you say, that collective group together which will work towards the particular thing. We know that palaeo tourism is exploding worldwide. There is no doubt in the world that there are a lot of dollars going into it.

One of the things I heard up north, which I think you raised, Mayor Hall, is infrastructure for the individuals who want to come out west to see these things. A lot of individuals who come out are driving their very expensive four-wheel drives and they talk about whether they want to come through the area on roads that have not been properly graded or sealed. What you are talking about here is very similar to what those up north spoke about. From a state perspective, what can we do to improve the experience for individuals who come here? One thing that was raised was accommodation, and another one was infrastructure like roads. Is that similar for you as well?

Mr Hall: Yes. Our accommodation infrastructure growth in the area has been probably the best it has been in 40 years.

CHAIR: And your airport has been upgraded in recent years?

Mr Hall: Yes. Roads are an issue.

Ms Barnes: For example, on the road from here to Eromanga Natural History Museum, for people coming through this way, we have narrow patches of road that need widening. They are safety issues.

CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off. What about the transportation issue as well, getting people here?

Ms Barnes: We feel that if this trail gets off the ground that creates business opportunities for people to look at tours, to look at buses, to look at picking up people from the airport or the train and taking them to Eromanga. It does create opportunities. Transportation wise, it generally will be a self-drive thing or an outback Aussie tour type thing. The other thing is that we are currently dealing with our airport upgrade. Again, you have problems when a project is assessed at \$2.2 million and the quote comes in at \$9½ million. That is an infrastructure problem as well in remote areas.

Mr BENNETT: How are the information centres staffed? Is it by volunteers or is it funded?

Mr Hall: Funded. They are employees of council.

Mr BENNETT: How many do you have there?

Mr Hall: There are three at the moment.

Mr BENNETT: I guess that is the same in other centres. They also have their information centres.

Mr Hall: Yes.

Mr BENNETT: Do you fund them or does that come from the state?

Mr Hall: The council funds them.

Mr BENNETT: Is it three full-time equivalents?

Mr Hall: There are two full-times and a casual.

Mr BENNETT: Do we have a percentage of international visitors coming through? The centre is a data collection point to some degree. I am just curious.

Mr Hall: There is, yes. We have our Queensland visitor numbers and our 'other', which is international and interstate. Last month I think there were 690 in that category.

Mr BENNETT: That is good. Let us say that I am very lazy and I want to fly to Quilpie and then go to the experience down the road. Is that possible now? Could someone pick up me and my family?

Ms Barnes: Very shortly you will be able to hire a car at Quilpie airport. We are working with two other shires to provide a car hire service.

Mr BENNETT: Good. Thanks.

CHAIR: Thank you for coming today.

MACKENZIE, Ms Robyn OAM, Museum Director, Eromanga Natural History Museum

MACKENZIE, Mr Stuart OAM, Private capacity

RICHARDS, Mr Corey, General Manager, Operations, Eromanga Natural History Museum

CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement before we ask questions?

Ms Mackenzie: Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional insights into the palaeo tourism industry, particularly in South-West Queensland, and also the items listed in the terms of reference relating to the inquiry into prehistoric dinosaur and palaeo tourism in Outback Queensland. As you are aware, since the introduction of the fossil *Muttaborrasaurus* to the emblems of Queensland bill in the Queensland parliament in 2023, this process involved the previous committee holding the inquiry and conducting site visits to Winton and Muttaborra to gather input from stakeholders. Now your visit to Quilpie shire and the Eromanga Natural History Museum adds yet another large piece to this unique prehistoric puzzle.

Queensland is in the fortunate position of having the lion's share of Australian dinosaur, megafauna and marine reptile discoveries. Added to this are the many other equally important fossil fauna and flora localities dotted across the state, ranging from fossils the size of a sand grain to the largest animals that ever walked on earth. This has undoubtedly provided significant opportunities for the community to not only preserve these fossils in context but also realise the economic, scientific and social benefits through palaeo tourism. Palaeo tourism has been well established overseas for over 100 years, providing some of the most visited destinations internationally. In 2019, representatives from the museum were invited on a Tourism and Events Queensland sponsored palaeo tourism study tour of Canada and the USA. We visited many established palaeo tourism destinations and it was an incredibly beneficial insight into how the Queensland palaeo tourism industry needs to develop.

It is apparent that there is exceptional growth potential to develop palaeo tourism in Queensland, especially through partnerships with investment attraction. Australia and particularly Queensland can now take the opportunity to fully embrace the emerging palaeo tourism industry on its own shores and compete and collaborate with our international counterparts. From our perspective at the Eromanga Natural History Museum, there is overwhelming support to see the palaeo tourism industry supported in a credible and ethical manner and further developed. We witness this daily not just with constant feedback from our visitors who are astounded by what they can see now but also from their desire to see future stages of the Eromanga Natural History Museum developed.

South-West Queensland knows what is best for its community and wants their diversity and uniqueness recognised and valued. Within these communities there are vast differences in the physical landscape, density of populations, industrial and economic activity, history and culture. The South-West Queensland community is reflecting the prehistoric part of this diversity by the establishment of a regional natural history museum which builds on the existing natural assets, skills, resources and aspirations for the future.

They wish to hold their fossil, natural and cultural heritage within their region to reflect this diversity and ensure the whole story can be accurately told. This brings a sense of pride and ownership not only to our region but to Queensland as a whole. Projects such as the Eromanga Natural History Museum give the outback region the ability to forge partnerships between government, business and the scientific community, enabling the museum to deliver to the world some of the most significant and most exciting scientific discoveries in the history of Australia. This will ensure the rest of the world can learn about and see these amazing discoveries held within the Eromanga Natural History Museum's diverse collection.

In 2021, the Eromanga Natural History Museum, in partnership with the Queensland Museum, announced the scientific publication of *Australotitan cooperensis*, Australia's largest dinosaur. This announcement delivered significant global value competitiveness, attracting over \$68 million in media value and reaching a potential audience of four billion people. It was the Queensland Museum's most successful species announcement ever and the first of many to come for the Eromanga Natural History Museum.

It is now 20 years since the catalyst discovery that kickstarted the development of the Eromanga Natural History Museum. This was a fist-size piece of dinosaur bone found by a 14-year-old boy west of Eromanga—the first dinosaur remains to be found in an area previously not thought to be able to preserve these fossils. This was an area that was nearly one-third of the state

of Queensland and an area which has a prehistoric story that differs from other parts of Queensland. As it turned out, this was just the tip of the palaeontological iceberg, and in the last 20 years many discoveries came and continue to come from different localities, ages, fauna, flora and environments across South-West Queensland. The Eromanga dinosaur and the Eulo megafauna fossil collections and localities collectively are the most extensive Australian Cretaceous and Quaternary fossil collections held in context in one collection and contain some of the best preserved fossil remains in Australia.

Projects like the museum are helping to build interstate tourism and scientific partnerships, with the collections not being confined to state boundaries. This provides the opportunity to collaborate and mutually benefit which is a unique geographical benefit of the Eromanga Natural History Museum. The south-west and border communities feel that it is very important that their heritage maintain a connection with the geographical area of discovery in a locally-based natural history museum.

Chair, the committee inquiry process has been an invaluable opportunity to bring to your attention the importance not only of palaeo tourism's contribution to the science community and tourism but, importantly, the major role that the Eromanga Natural History Museum and South-West Queensland now play in this industry. In this region, palaeo tourism is a catalyst for the tourism industry, helping to establish a positive and strong future, breaking new ground and perhaps even challenging the status quo for Queensland tourism.

Based on input provided by the Eromanga Natural History Museum stakeholders, we would like to provide five recommendations for the committee to consider for the bill prior to its passage through the parliament. In addition to the recommendations from the Tourism and Events Queensland's *Value of dinosaur tourism 2022*, we believe that for the palaeo tourism industry to be able to reach its potential for Queensland it is important to give these recommendations serious consideration.

No. 1: we recommend informing decision-makers about all the palaeo tourism industry key stakeholders and destinations such as the continuing development of the world-class Eromanga Natural History Museum. Located in Southwest Queensland, this museum is the closest dinosaur museum to all capital cities and a major drawcard for southern states. As a major Australian and international attraction and the first stop on the unofficial Australia's Dinosaur Trail, it plays a vital role in connecting southern states to the north. This is also evidenced in the *Value of dinosaur tourism* study area.

No. 2: we recommend recognising palaeo tourism as a unique point of difference for Queensland from the rest of Australia, on par with its beaches, islands and reefs. To elevate its global profile, significant investment and promotion of palaeo tourism are necessary.

No. 3: many palaeo tourism projects require financial support from both levels of government and the current system makes it incredibly difficult to coordinate and establish direct partnerships. To streamline project funding, we recommend that federal and state governments align their funding streams and enhance collaboration. This will simplify coordination and foster direct partnerships, improving efficiency and impact.

No. 4: we recommend supporting the newly developed Dinosaur Experiences Australia and recognising the collaborative efforts of those involved and the potential value of palaeo tourism destinations, including new and emerging internationally significant destinations and high-growth opportunities, again such as the Eromanga Natural History Museum. These efforts should be integrated into the framework for identifying and delivering infrastructure projects in Queensland's Towards Tourism 2032 plan.

No. 5: lastly, we recommend recognising strategically located and regionally catalytic palaeo tourism projects as projects of state tourism significance, further cementing Queensland as the Australian authority on palaeo tourism. We ask you to respectfully consider our recommendations.

Chair, we thank you for this opportunity and we thank you for travelling to Quilpie to hear our input and ensure our views are reflected in your decision-making, and we welcome any questions you may have. I would also like to take this opportunity on behalf of the Eromanga Natural History Museum to thank all those community members who have participated today and over the past 20 years towards helping South-West Queensland develop the Eromanga Natural History Museum and the palaeo tourism industry. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your opening statement. I will pass to the deputy chair the first question.

Mr BENNETT: You referenced the 2023 submission that you wrote around other issues that have now gone past us. In particular, you talked about a tourism road map. I do not know that I have seen that. What was the date that came out? How do you see the trail that has already been spoken about developing, because you base your comments in line with the road map? Was it clearly identified within that document what you thought the road map—

Ms Mackenzie: Is Queensland's Towards Tourism 2032 the plan that you are talking about?

Mr BENNETT: You referenced it when you wrote to the committee in 2023 about a couple of other issues. You referenced in paragraph 7, 'Establishment of a Trail: In alignment with the roadmap'. I am trying to establish what the road map was trying to tell us back then.

Ms Mackenzie: I am going to throw to Corey because he has been involved in that part of it.

Mr Richards: I also sit on the Dinosaur Experiences Australia board, which is seed funded by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. The collective is an establishing committee at the moment which has been developing and, of course, considering these challenges, which are: how do we start to showcase all of our palaeo tourism experiences as a whole and as a collaborative voice? Of course, it makes it so much easier than us trying to do it by ourselves.

The document that Robyn has been referencing in our original submission also reflects that the palaeo trail is a feeder trail that starts with a lot of our interstate counterparts as well. We continue to see that as a major connection that we as a state should be chaperoning as well—places like Lightning Ridge, which has some incredible discoveries happening at the Australian Opal Centre but even the Ediacara biotas that are coming up at Parachilna in South Australia as well in the northern Flinders. They are all some of the feeders.

If we essentially have our situation together and also have a framework, which is what the collective is starting with businesses like ours and the other members—you will hear from Dinosaur Experiences Australia today, but essentially we have ourselves as one of the founding members, Kronosaurus Korner at Richmond, the Flinders Discovery Centre at Hughenden and the Riversleigh Fossil Discovery Centre at Mount Isa—identifying those key linkages into other states as well, we would love to be able to chaperone that as well with a trail, which should probably be a federal thing down the track but it has to start somewhere.

Mr BENNETT: The road map was a document that was prepared at some point in time. How old would that be now, Corey?

Mr Richards: I think that was originally done in 2019.

Mr BENNETT: It is still reflective of your aspirations for the trail in some form? Is that still current?

Ms Mackenzie: Yes. The whole trail probably started well before then. We were party to an ARC grant. One of the main objectives of the early days, in the early 2000s, was to have a national palaeo trail. I think that was a bit too bold a step to start with and it did not get off the ground. The whole idea of this trail has been around for a long time. We are just trying to tailor it so that it is achievable. I think all the palaeo tourism offerings now are that much more mature. They are much more ready to be part of that. You are seeing that, as I say, interstate with what they are doing in South Australia and what they are doing in New South Wales as well. Their products are maturing with further investment since the mid-2000s, when we first started out with the whole concept. The road map is certainly what we want to follow. Like everything over time, you tweak it to suit.

Mr BENNETT: Is that available for the committee to have a look at?

Mr Richards: That is a Tourism and Events Queensland road map.

Mr BENNETT: It would be online somewhere?

Ms Mackenzie: It should be.

Mr Richards: I think it may have been superseded recently with the adoption of the collective. Their mission, value statements and goals have essentially absorbed that.

Mr SKELTON: My question is more for the next group, really, because you have been pretty comprehensive in what you have said, Ms Mackenzie. The Eromanga Natural History Museum has now made an imprint on the tourism industry and you are looking to the future for expansion, as well as continuing your research and potential new discoveries. What would you like to see from the government in that regard?

Ms Mackenzie: Obviously we are desperately trying to get the major—you will understand more about this tomorrow when you visit. At the moment, we have the front and the back of the museum built and we have a big gap in the middle where—

Mr SKELTON: Stage 3.

Ms Mackenzie: Stage 3, yes. Without that we cannot put on display what we are finding, basically, and we cannot tell the story as well as we should. It is restricting us.

Mr SKELTON: I can imagine you need some floor space, just quietly. It makes sense.

Ms Mackenzie: It is more than just about putting a big dinosaur on display. There is a lot more to the story to be told. We actually have a human origins exhibition that we are developing with a professor from Bond University. There is a bunch of other stuff as well that will go into these galleries. It is a really important part of our museum. It will not only provide a lot more educational benefit and visitation benefit for everybody but also help from an operational point of view. We will not have a big gap between our facilities. It will be much easier for us to run and operate more efficiently as well.

Mr SKELTON: I imagine when you are talking about these remains and so forth, it must be challenging, given the environmental conditions, to keep everything so it stays that way.

Ms Mackenzie: We are better off than most state museums. In these regional areas, we have the best museum conditions for conservation because we do not have humidity. You might be familiar with the problems they are having in Brisbane. We do not flood. When we built the museum we chose a site deliberately that does not flood. Because of our dry climate, it is really great for conservation as well. In that sense, having a museum in the region is probably easier.

Mr Mackenzie: Building state roads.

Mr SKELTON: Rather than transporting it somewhere else and taking away that opportunity from the regions.

Ms Mackenzie: Visitors get a much richer experience as well. It is more relevant to them. Seeing that geological and palaeontological story in context is a much more relevant story in terms of understanding how things have changed in the past and will continue to change, basically, in our environment.

CHAIR: In your opening address, you made a comment around diversity and the uniqueness of the south-west and the border areas. What do you think the diversity and uniqueness actually is for this area? Even though we are talking about having a collective focus on a trail generally that will probably extend even north of here, what would be your uniqueness that you would be focusing on?

Ms Mackenzie: In our case, we are the natural history museum so our uniqueness would focus around anything that is natural history. Obviously the dinosaurs are from a different age and, potentially, a different environmental time as well and there is a difference in species so there is a whole different story to be told there. We also have some of the most significant megafauna sites at Eulo and microfauna as well. We are currently writing a paper on that. They are completely unique. They are mud spring sites. Nowhere else in Australia will you find anything like these particular sites.

CHAIR: It is very exciting.

Ms Mackenzie: That is completely unique. The fauna in it tells a new story as well. Then you go through all our own modern-day species as well. We have a lot of unique plants and animals down here. The geology or the geography like the river systems—there is something like seven different river systems in this area. There is a whole bunch of different stories that can be created through those areas as well. People travelling out here can learn as they cross every river the story behind that river, why it is there. There is a story from prehistoric times right through to modern day and the European story behind it as well. Obviously, culturally, every area has its own cultural story. With diversity, it is not a one-size-fits-all in terms of natural history. Queensland is a very big state. South-West Queensland is probably a well-kept secret in the sense that no-one has really realised how diverse it is here. We have industries across the whole spectrum just about, from wineries to cotton, cattle to sheep. Pretty much anything that you can put your finger on is happening in South-West Queensland. It is very diverse.

CHAIR: Do you have any issues with staffing? Do you have any shortages? Is there anything that you are looking for with regard to staffing that maybe the state could assist with?

Ms Mackenzie: Yes. I will throw to Corey because he is an absolute expert on that. He is our HR officer.

Mr Richards: As you have probably gathered, with all of our rural and regional businesses we have to scale up and down seasonally. A big thing with that is training. Streamlining our training has been a really massive thing. We do like to commend some of the things that are being done recently, like with the Queensland Tourism Industry Council when they are doing their microcredentialing programs. Accessibility to remote training is incredibly important to businesses like ours. The value proposition that we can give to potential employees is also really important. We have great support and relationships with our council that means we are in the lucky position to provide housing for our staff. That seems to be a key thing. Of course, housing is always an issue.

Additionally, one way that the state could support is—we are looking at trying to introduce partnerships. We are so lucky that our state is so diverse and so big. We have opposing seasons across the entire state. For North Queenslanders, summer is their main time whereas winter is our main time. We are looking at creating those connections between us and all of our facilities and universities, with schools as well. It is about connecting not so much business to business but business to education and business to other businesses in other areas that we can create connection with so that we can have ongoing employees. The issue is that we are spending a huge amount of HR investment on training annually, which is just the nature of the beast, I guess.

Ms Mackenzie: It keeps that continuing. One employee can be employed right through the whole year, during that whole season, basically.

Mr BENNETT: I am interested in marketing and advertising. Perhaps tonight we could talk about what you are trying to do to encourage those things. We have a doctor waiting on the phone now so tonight we might talk about that a bit more. I would love to hear how that is going.

Ms Mackenzie: Absolutely.

HOCKNULL, Dr Scott, Private capacity (via teleconference)

CHAIR: I now welcome Dr Scott Hocknull. Would you like to make an opening statement before we start our questions?

Dr Hocknull: Thank you, honourable members, for the invitation to speak. I appreciate the time the committee has taken to better understand the opportunities and challenges of Queensland palaeo tourism. As background, I have worked as a professional palaeontologist for Queensland for over 30 years and have been involved in many aspects of regional palaeontology and palaeo tourism over that time. From my perspective, palaeo tourism plays an ever-increasing and important role in heritage and natural tourism across the globe. This has developed due to a perfect storm of continued new discoveries and dominance of palaeontology in popular culture. The popular culture of palaeontology is derived far and wide and is delivered from regional museums through to creative industries and it plays a part in defining our national identity.

Our palaeo story is uniquely Australian but it does share a connection with the rest of the planet. The telling of the Australian prehistoric story is far from complete yet forms a major part of our shared heritage. Like most heritage, these stories are best told within the context of the places and regions from where they come. The draw of dinosaurs and prehistoric animals is exceptional. We only have to look at the multimillion dollar production of palaeo related streaming content to understand that the topic is multigenerational and global. For those who are my age or younger, we have grown up in this pop culture. Travel choices as families and then as retirees include palaeo tourism. It is a significant hook now and into the future.

The high level of interest comes with an equally high expectation for any attraction, so the challenge for any regional attraction is to meet those expectations. Expectations can continue to change and grow so attractions need to be maintained excitingly, entertainingly and with cutting-edge interpretations driven by new discoveries, solid science and creative interpretation. This takes advantage of new technologies and new digital technologies in particular. Equally, those experiences need to be supported by excellent tourism infrastructure to make travel and stay memorable and equal to the palaeontological experiences, so developing both requires investment and sustained long-term support.

The Eromanga Natural History Museum is a great example of the opportunity palaeo tourism offers a region no matter the location or current population size. The south-west region of Queensland has become a new frontier of dinosaur and prehistoric fossil discoveries because of the work of locals. Now it boasts many of the most important dinosaur and megafauna sites and collections from Australia. Discoveries in this region have only just begun.

The key thing about the Eromanga story is that it demonstrates that discoveries can occur anywhere, at any time, by anyone across Queensland and actually across Australia for that matter. Developing these discoveries into attractions across the regions and between regions connects visitors to the state and, of course, to the nation and this will inevitably become a national palaeo tourism trail. Queensland has the jump on other states and is best positioned to capitalise on and drive this vision, but we are not the only state to have palaeontology.

The key advantage I see is that palaeo tourism offers something unlike any other natural or heritage-based tourism. The process of actual discovery, research, interpretation and storytelling is the product. It inevitably changes through time, so visitor experiences must evolve to match the discoveries and scientific outcomes. This sets palaeo tourism apart from many other tourism offerings.

A key challenge for regional palaeo tourism is finding ways to sustainably resource the discovery-to-interpretation pathway for the regional palaeo tourism products. For Queensland palaeo tourism to host a series of world-leading attractions, products and events, we need to maintain this pathway in a more sustained manner. How this is achieved is an open question and needs good answers.

One possible answer comes from the added opportunity regional palaeo tourism offers in terms of a primary catalyst for citizen science education hubs from primary and tertiary schooling through to vocational education, local creative industries, environmental management, domestic and international research and, of course, traditional knowledge incorporation and collaboration. There are many benefits to the region as a key attraction. Palaeo tourism is actually resilient to the effects of climate change and offers options for communities to develop tourism alongside changes in local resource industries.

Most importantly to me is the establishment of these regions and entities as central hubs for education, providing experiences for kids, whether they are country or city, that inspire a deeper physical connection and appreciation of their country. With that, I thank you very much for giving me the time to make a statement. I am happy to answer any questions.

Mr BENNETT: Dr Hocknull, I am curious about the amount of fossils in existence that are still awaiting scientific naming that you are working with?

Dr Hocknull: It is a bit difficult to know for sure but we literally have just scratched the surface. It is one of those amazing parts of palaeontology globally that Australia is the last friendly frontier. You can imagine that most other countries, other than say Antarctica or South America, are more productive than Australia at this stage. Africa is the same thing. We are still a last frontier for palaeontological discoveries.

Having said that, we have vast areas where this material will be discovered and is being discovered. The south-west of Queensland is a great example of that: we knew nothing about dinosaurs or megafauna in the whole of the south-west of Queensland until the discoveries were made and they just continue to come.

How many? There are literally hundreds. There are actually several thousand species of dinosaur so far known from most of the rest of the planet. Australia has only a small fraction of those found and named and discovered. There is a lot to go.

Mr BENNETT: How do you think academia would feel if we gave the general public more input into naming some of the more engaged fossils we might find, as a promotion and a tourism knock-off? How do you feel about that?

Dr Hocknull: In palaeontology we are actually quite open to that opportunity. In particular, there is a longstanding relationship between industries and the naming of animals that are discovered. For example, there is a qantassaurus, named after Qantas, and atlascopcosaurus, named after the Atlas Copco company. When we first discover dinosaurs we try to engender them with a nickname that is relevant to the area: 'Cooper' obviously for Cooper Basin and Cooper Creek. Then we translate that somehow into the scientific names. Involving the public is a fantastic opportunity. We hope that we would not end up with 'Dinosauric McDinosaurface' like the ship but, yes, we could certainly use that as a linchpin. Even in the past, species' names have come from philanthropy. People who have given money have been honoured in that way.

Mr SKELTON: I have been to the Queensland Museum recently. I actually went to the dinosaurs and the *Jurassic World* Lego exhibition because of my children. I noted that there was nothing in that attraction—or it was not very obvious—in terms of the dinosaur trail, where you can see and potentially discover dinosaurs in Queensland. It just was not obvious to me. Even through that forum, do you think we could be promoting a lot more heavily?

Dr Hocknull: Yes, that is a very good point. That is one of the key issues of having a coordinated, collaborative approach to promotion of regional entities and all of them in a connected sense. As the lead curator for *Dinosaurs Unearthed* at the museum, we did create a map that people could follow to go to different places, but external exhibitions such as the Lego experience with *Jurassic World* are very much controlled by the entities that bring in the touring exhibitions. I suggest that one opportunity that would be awesome would be for Queensland organisations to collaborate on an international touring exhibition of Queensland-based fossil dinosaurs. That would be a major drawcard for international visitors—having seen it somewhere travelling around, to know that we have this in Queensland and further abroad. I take your point: it is a coordinated effort and I think the opportunities are there to do that. Dinosaur Experiences Australia is a great step in that direction to coordinate that sort of thing and to get people to understand that things are outside the Toowoomba Range and they can go west or north; it is all there.

CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Hocknull. You have given us a good segue. Thank you for your time.

FITZGERALD, Mr John, Chairman, Dinosaur Experiences Australia (via teleconference)

SELLARULO, Ms Ingrid, Program Manager, Dinosaur Experiences Australia (via teleconference)

CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement before we start our questions?

Mr Fitzgerald: It is great to be with you today as the inaugural chair of Dinosaur Experiences Australia. I acknowledge those in the room who have been doing this for a lot longer than I have. I am a Queensland, born and bred in Rockhampton—some years ago now—but I live in Hobart. I have been down here for about 11 or 12 years. Prior to that I spent time living and working in Queensland and the Northern Territory. I can assure you that nobody is going to be cheering louder for the Maroons than I will be next week! My experience is in destination management and leadership. Until 12 or 18 months ago, I had spent 10 years as CEO of Tourism Tasmania. We are the state tourism organisation for Tasmania. Prior to that, I was also CEO of Tourism NT. I have spent time running regional tourism as well. Back in the late 2000s I was CEO of Tourism Sunshine Coast, which is now Visit Sunshine Coast. These days I am living in Tasmania and privately consulting back to the sector, but I was looking for opportunities to make an ongoing public good contribution to tourism.

One thing I do know is that people travel to difference. For me, palaeo is an opportunity for Outback Queensland to provide that difference. That is what appealed to me in getting involved as inaugural chair. I would like to applaud Queensland on the foresight to establish an organisation that is going to focus on palaeo tourism, and that is our role at Dinosaur Experiences Australia. My role more specifically is to support implementation of our plans, to provide leadership and to encourage the collaboration of a palaeo sector to grow their contribution to their community. So far, I can tell the committee that the board and the organisation are really working well together. I am encouraged for the future.

That is a bit of background as to how and why I am involved. I am excited about it. It is a public good thing for me. I am a volunteer, but it is great to be working with the sector up there because I think palaeo has such a great opportunity for the future. If Ingrid is there, I think she will take over from here.

CHAIR: Sorry, John, we do not have her online at this point in time. Actually, Corey Richards has Ingrid's opening statement, which can be read into the record if we cannot get Ingrid. I will just wait for the committee secretary to come back and see whether she has been successful in getting Ingrid online.

Mr BENNETT: John, I would be really interested in hearing more about your work. I asked some questions previously of other witnesses about how tourism promotion and other issues are coming together. I am very interested in some of the challenges in terms of how we are going to make sure palaeo tourism becomes all it can be.

Mr Fitzgerald: It is a great opportunity. There are a couple of things that we need to keep an eye on. The first thing is making sure it is really embedded in Queensland's tourism plans going forward. I am doing other work in Queensland at the moment, looking at 2032 and beyond. It is just really critical that palaeo becomes one of those fundamental pillars so that all of the government organisations in particular, and the tourism organisations specifically, have this as part of their focus. Ongoing demand generation will be fundamental, but probably the biggest challenges sit on the supply side—ensuring the attractions and the communities are well equipped to present the experiences in the best possible way and the most engaging way. One of the things we will do at Dinosaur Experiences Australia is work with our members—we have four foundation members—to look at what are those products and experiences that are going to appeal to the market and how we will work with attractions to help them present those in the best possible way.

I have visited many of the attractions in the outback. When you visit Eromanga, you see Cooper still in pieces on the ground. Where government really needs to be responding is making sure the attractions have the resources to build truly world-leading places to visit and to engage. People are interested in palaeo. That is everyone, from people travelling into the regions just for general tourism to those sort of palaeo fanatics that we are also trying to locate in various parts around the world.

It is a mixture of making sure the demand continues to be focused but, really, there is a fair bit of heavy lifting to be done to make sure the attractions are equipped, resourced and funded to present these things in the best possible way. The other thing, of course, is access to the outback. How do we get the transportation systems aligned to the experiences out there and really humming for those regions? That is probably the first thing that comes immediately to my mind.

CHAIR: I think we have been able to secure the line with Ingrid. We have just spoken with John Fitzgerald and he has indicated that you may have an opening statement for us.

Ms Sellarulo: Thank you, Mr Chair, and members of the parliament committee. We appreciate the opportunity to speak today and provide additional insights into the palaeo tourism industry, particularly from a tourism collective perspective and, more specifically, Dinosaur Experiences Australia. By way of introduction, I am an experienced tourism professional with 28 years of expertise in project managing. During my career I have worked with various organisations such as Sunlover Holidays, Virgin Australia and Tourism Australia. I am now based in Queensland and I run a tourism consultancy business working on a variety of projects for companies such as Tourism Australia and Tourism and Events Queensland. Most importantly, I am thrilled to be working with Dinosaur Experiences Australia. It is such an exciting area of tourism. I just love seeing the network and the junction of tourism and science working hand in hand. My role at Dinosaur Experiences Australia is program manager, or executive officer, and I work three days a week.

Outback Queensland has a really great, rare and unique opportunity to dramatically grow the tourism economy by consolidating the regions behind this unique selling point—USP—of dinosaurs in Outback Queensland. Dinosaurs almost universally capture the interest and minds of people both young and old. Under a dinosaur theme, Outback Queensland has the opportunity to concentrate its tourism profile and provide a long-term road map for growth in this space.

Queensland, Australia is really in the fortunate position of being able to offer some of the most incredible dinosaur experiences in the world. We have an abundance of Australian dinosaurs, megafauna, marine reptiles and discovery finds. Many of the experts I have spoken to say that we are sitting on the edge of a fossil-finding explosion in the outback and we have barely touched the surface yet. This will undoubtedly provide significant opportunities for communities to preserve these fossils in context and realise the economic, scientific and social benefits behind palaeo tourism.

Dinosaur Experiences Australia is a collective of palaeo attractions. Our founding members are: the Riversleigh Fossil Discovery Centre, located up north in the Mount Isa region, which showcases fascinating megafauna fossils; Kronosaurus Korner, situated in Richmond in the mid outback, which highlights many prehistoric marine species discovered in the ancient Eromanga Sea; the Flinders Discovery Centre, the home of the lovely muttaburrasaurus—our state emblem—which provides insights into this iconic dinosaur; and, of course, the Eromanga Natural History Museum, which you will experience this afternoon. You will be blown away by this amazing attraction and what it has to offer. In particular you will get to meet Cooper, the largest sauropod found in Australia. Working together as a group we can achieve better returns on economic growth, reaching markets and consumers interstate and globally more effectively.

Our unique selling point, Outback Queensland, has multiple dinosaur-based attractions spread throughout outback communities. Combined, these attractions account for about 11 per cent of all tourism and 20 per cent of leisure tourism visitors. Dinosaur attractions are not the only reason people visit the outback; however, they do play a significant role in enticing visitors by offering a unique selling point. Focusing on the USP of dinosaurs and palaeo tourism in the outback and amplifying this USP will create a halo effect. This will support the growth of tourism and economic benefits across all of the outback.

Our objectives at Dinosaur Experiences Australia are clear: we aim to present Outback Queensland's rich dinosaur experiences to the world. We accelerate demand by facilitating lead opportunities for the members of Dinosaur Experiences Australia and driving increased interest and visitation. We elevate the profile of our collective and showcase the unique experiences we offer in key markets globally to attract more visitors. We expand market opportunities, connect with new audiences, broaden our market reach and tap into diverse consumer segments. Ensuring sustainability is important, building long-term sustainability and self-generated revenue streams for Dinosaur Experiences Australia to continue growth and development. Our strength is in our unity. Our collective approach offers strong outcomes and broadened reach across various markets, including education, palaeo enthusiasts and, of course, the family market by supporting attractions to develop new experiences. Perhaps one gap to target is the high-value traveller, those with limited time but significantly more money to spend in the outback.

Addressing accessibility challenges is always an area we need to work on. Accessibility and limited transport to the outback remains, as you probably would have heard today, a significant challenge that we face as a collective. A united front offers robust promotional partnerships, making it easier for tourism operators, ground handlers and destination management companies to work with us as we mitigate the challenges posed by our remote location. These partnerships enhance the overall value proposition of palaeo experiences, making them more attractive and accessible.

Based on the input of our stakeholders, we would like to provide four recommendations for the committee to consider before the bill is passed by parliament. We believe that for the palaeo tourism industry to reach its full potential in Queensland it is important to consider these recommendations (1) ensuring palaeo tourism remains a key element of Queensland's tourism offering and promotion going forward as part of the plan for 2032 and beyond; (2) supporting palaeo attractions in Outback Queensland to develop and present highly engaging experiences for domestic and international travellers and markets; (3) ensuring transportation and infrastructure are in place to enable access to key palaeo attractions throughout Queensland; and (4) ensuring funding programs are available and aligned to embrace palaeo tourism expansion opportunities through product and infrastructure development. This will enable attractions to present their experiences in a highly engaging way to customers.

In conclusion, by standing together to promote our unique palaeo experiences we can unlock significant economic growth for Outback Queensland. Our collective strengths will amplify the appeal of these incredible attractions, attracting more visitors and providing enriching, memorable experiences that showcase Australia's unique palaeo heritage. Thank you for your attention, your support and your time today in making Outback Queensland a leading destination for palaeo tourism.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. We have time for probably two questions.

Mr BENNETT: Dinosaur Experiences Australia has four foundation members, but there are other palaeo providers and institutions around Outback Queensland. I am just curious as to why they are not part of Dinosaur Experiences Australia.

Ms Sellarulo: Yes, that is actually a really good question. We only recently commenced work in this area. The business was formed in August 2023. When it was first created, in the initial stages everyone had to meet criteria to be part of it. You needed to have 88.8 per cent Best of Queensland Experiences standards, which is a pillar that Tourism and Events Queensland uses to make sure tourism businesses are meeting the requirements of the consumer. In the first instance, that was the pillar that organisations were required to meet. That is how it was formed; however, now that we have a board and a committee it will start to broaden and we will start to talk to other organisations and attractions. We know there are many more that would fit underneath this particular umbrella.

Mr SKELTON: According to Tourism and Events Queensland, we are attracting up to 135,000 visitors a year. I note that the Dinosaur Experiences website is up and running. Are you capturing any data on where that is going and what numbers are viewing it?

Ms Sellarulo: Yes. We launched the website about one week ago, so it is very new; however, we will absolutely be capturing data as we move forward through the organisation, yes.

Mr SKELTON: Obviously the data will inform you on where you need to position yourself in the market in relation to YouTube channels and other media forms.

Ms Sellarulo: Absolutely. We do have socials and we are open to finding our marketing strategy based on where we are getting engagement. Certainly we do have a strategy that is quite robust around trade partnerships and the consumer direct education market as well as working in partnership with other ground handlers and providers.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ingrid and John, for joining us today via teleconference. Your input was enlightening. It is really good to see that, as you say, a collective is getting together. There was a discussion earlier with Eromanga about that as well. Thank you for your time.

MACKENZIE, Mr Stuart OAM, Chairman, Outback Gondwana Foundation Ltd

Mr Mackenzie: Thank you for making the effort to get out here. I do not think we have had too many parliamentary committee inquiries in Quilpie before, so we really appreciate that. I hope the committee members who are not here will get the opportunity to see what we are talking about and what you no doubt will take back to them.

Just for your information, I was mayor here for the last 12 years. I was founding chair—and still am—of the Outback Gondwana Foundation. I also spent 12 years on the Outback Queensland Tourism Association. You mentioned earlier, Steve, one of the 14 RTOs in Queensland. I was chair of that for a couple of years. I also spent six years on the Queensland Tourism Industry Council. You probably know or know of Daniel Gschwind, who was our CEO for many years. I have had a lot to do with tourism generally across the state through those organisations. One thing we were regularly told was that tourism in Queensland is really about the Gold Coast and the Great Barrier Reef and everything else is a second cousin. In that time palaeo came to the fore more and more, and TEQ in particular recognised that.

As was mentioned earlier, I went on a study tour to North America in 2019, and that was a great opportunity. We went to 10 different museums ranging from Drumheller up near Calgary down to LA. That was an insight into what the palaeo tourism product could look like here in 50 years, maybe more. They all started in a very similar way: from a discovery. Then normally a local group took that on, and then they got government support and built these magnificent museums. At Eromanga we recognised that, and we are building something that is going to be there for hundreds of years. That has been very clear.

When we were strategising at OQTA we were very mindful of the fact that every state in Australia has an outback except Tasmania. Queensland's outback is probably not the most popular—the Northern Territory is very popular, Western Australia through the Kimberley and even New South Wales—but the thing Outback Queensland has that other states do not really have is palaeo. That was why it was so important for us to make the most of it. A lot of what is happening in Queensland tourism and what we are trying to do out here and elsewhere in the state is because of that.

The other thing that is really worth noting in relation to Outback Queensland tourism, which is a third or more of the state, is that it covers Mount Isa, Richmond, Hughenden, Boulia, Winton, Muttaborra, Eromanga and Eulo, so all of the palaeo places are in the Outback Queensland RTO footprint. It is the key marketing body; it is also very underfunded. All of the RTOs only have so much they can do. They have to promote everyone, of course, not just palaeo, so they play a role. I think Tourism and Events Queensland has seen it as more of a state tourism issue than just an Outback Queensland issue, but the Outback Queensland RTO certainly does recognise it and it plays a key role.

In Outback Queensland, the key investors are local governments. Unlike the Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and even Cairns and Townsville et cetera, where there is a lot more private investment in tourism, out here the local governments predominantly do most of the investing. With the major tourist attractions like Eromanga, it has to come from local government, state government and federal government. That is the challenge we have. There really is nowhere else to go for the sort of funds we need to develop that palaeo industry like we saw over in northern America except to go to state and federal governments. I suppose a key message here is that we are constricted by that. However, if it is worth doing and it is going to be here for hundreds of years then it is worth pursuing and the money will come from somewhere.

The opportunities that will come here have been mentioned. We have the Strzelecki Track that goes down through South Australia. It is going to be sealed in a year or two. That will bring South Australian and Western Australian traffic up through this area. The Warri Gate was mentioned earlier. That goes down to Broken Hill. If they can get that funded it is the same thing: it will open up to Melbourne and Sydney traffic, which will come through this way. That will really open up huge opportunities for us.

That is where it is at. It is very exciting. It has all been said earlier that the discoveries continue to happen. You will find out more when you go to the museum and you have probably seen it from your other travels: the discovery of the material in the ground is only the first step. The longer step is actually getting it back to the lab and preparing that material so that it is actually there for people to view. That takes a lot of time and resources. All of the discoveries that have been made so far have been taken to the various museums. The next stage of that is actually opening all those jackets and presenting that material and preparing it. That is still happening now and there are vast amounts of material where that has happened. That is already in the pipeline.

As I was saying to Steve earlier, the demographic that we are really seeing increase and the one we are really pursuing is the families. We were grey nomads but that has really changed, certainly in my time in outback tourism. We are seeing more and more families and the holiday periods are our busiest times now, which has a huge potential. We are not going to tap anywhere near what that could be but it is almost unending. That is a great opportunity.

CHAIR: Thank you, Stuart. I want to come to the statement that you just made about seeing a different trend and that families are now becoming a lot more dominant than they were previously. Do you think there is a real opportunity for sundry type businesses to be built around that so that you can give families a bit more of an experience than just the dinosaurs? Obviously we are looking at palaeo tourism here but we are also looking at tourism generally, because there is a knock-on effect given what you have for families. While I will not be disparaging to young kids these days, there is a short time in which they want to do things. Dinosaurs have always been fascinating, but do you see that these add-ons should be promoted for the areas to build up an overall experience for families?

Mr Mackenzie: Chair, that is a really good question because it is that secondary investment, as I call it. You get the catalyst investment, which is what the palaeo is, but then you need to get people here and keep them here. The quickest way to double tourism is to keep people twice as long, not necessarily get twice as many people.

At other places they go such as the Great Barrier Reef, the Gold Coast and whatever, there are a lot of things to do so what you are saying is so true: it is the old chicken-and-egg thing. Which comes first? Even here in the past few years we have seen three major tourist hospitality businesses start up. The Lake just out of town is one. There is a homestay, which you will drive past this afternoon, that has 20 cabins and it just opened this year. It can take buses. Down here we do not have the accommodation to take buses, for instance, or not much but now we have that. Those basic things are so important. There is another homestay out of town that is high-level. It has also done really well. You need accommodation that takes the buses. Then while they are here, what do they do in Quilpie? What do they do in Charleville on the way out et cetera? I think the mayor mentioned school bus tours earlier. One of the reasons we have been struggling to get them here is because they go to Longreach and there are three or four things to do there, or more, whereas out here there is not as much. That is something that we are very aware of. It is the chicken and egg. It is having that one catch and then, hopefully, you can grow and nurture those other experiences around that.

Mr BENNETT: I am interested to know a bit more about the Outback Gondwana Foundation. I see you funded a research facility some time ago. I am interested in what the foundation will be doing in the future.

Mr Mackenzie: It is probably worth noting that one of the first things we were told when we made discoveries was that we could keep them in our backyard if we wanted to but they would never be recognised by the world of science. To do that, they have to be publicly owned and publicly accessible so the scientific world will describe them et cetera. We had to set up a public company, which is what the Outback Gondwana Foundation is. It is a not-for-profit. In essence, this collection is publicly owned, like the collection at the Queensland Museum. That was the reason for the foundation being set up. It is still the overarching body that oversees the natural history museum et cetera.

Mr BENNETT: What is in the pipeline for the foundation at the moment? Is it business as usual? I was reading in the community profile about the research laboratory that you funded a couple of years ago.

Mr Mackenzie: That was funded by the state government and it was built. All the science is funded through this foundation. We have sponsors. We have a lot of volunteers who come out and do the prepping or whatever. It is a not-for-profit. That is how they all work under that structure.

Mr BENNETT: Are there any links to universities at the museum?

Mr Mackenzie: Yes, we have a lot of connections with unis.

Mr BENNETT: Would they be doctorate students or just interested students?

Mr Mackenzie: We have had some senior people, professors and the like, coming in and doing some research. We are trying to nurture those relationships all the time with the universities.

Mr BENNETT: It makes sense.

Mr Mackenzie: There is a great opportunity there to do that. Again, we need the facilities to do that. The research centre, which you will see in the morning probably, is the first step of that. It is a really good laboratory.

Mr SKELTON: Stuart, bearing in mind your extensive background in government and tourism, what do you see as the most vital actions government can take to support the palaeo tourism industry in the next five years?

Mr Mackenzie: Obviously continue to fund where possible the development of the products because it has to happen; it is just really about how long it takes. It might take 20 years, it might take 50 years or it might take 10 years. Every step of the way, every bit of funding is so critical in doing that. That is probably the most important thing that the government can do.

The state government, I have to say, has been absolutely the frontrunner as far as funding is concerned—more so than the federal. We have had great support from the state government on this thing and also just tourism in general. It was mentioned earlier, recognising palaeo as possibly one of the second-tier major attractions in Queensland. As I said, there is the Gold Coast, the Whitsundays, the Great Barrier Reef, Cairns et cetera, but there is another major attraction in the outback. The outback has everything that every other outback has, but palaeo tourism is a great opportunity.

Mr SKELTON: You mentioned that in the west, in comparison to the eastern seaboard, there is not a lot of private investment. It is motivated by local councils and locals so more government investment has to occur because there is not that catalyst. Taking that on board, obviously from the state government's perspective, I would be trying to see a different model of funding to weigh that in in terms of how we spend our money on tourism and mine that disparity. This is probably just my view, but you could pretty much set and forget the Gold Coast, Cairns and the Whitsundays because everyone knows what they offer. Wouldn't it be better to spend those resources in western Queensland where, as you said, it is a second tier that is not as well known? You could ask any man in the street or anyone from overseas and they would mention those destinations. Would that be a fair summary for looking at funding and how we weigh it up?

Mr Mackenzie: Yes, absolutely. You need the people coming through, the people who understand the promotion et cetera as well as funding. They need to happen at the same time so that as you build the new product—

Mr SKELTON: You have to build the profile.

Mr Mackenzie:—you get enough people coming through to keep everything going. One of the great challenges out here is what you could call postcode discrimination, I suppose. It is not so much with elected members; it is with the directors-general, the public servants et cetera. When you say you have only 1,000 people living in the shire, the shades start to drop. We know it is a numbers game down on the coast, but unless you invest in these areas then they can never have more people and private investment and so on. You have to probably try to get away from that idea that 'there is no-one out there anyway so why invest out there?'

Mr SKELTON: As you point out, the private sector does pick up the slack in those areas.

Mr Mackenzie: Yes, in those other areas but not out here. It will come. That secondary private investment is happening at a lower level here now but it will come. There are some great things happening in the regions which often is a great surprise to people, to be honest.

CHAIR: Mr Mackenzie, thank you for your time.

HALL, Mr Ben, Mayor, Quilpie Shire Council

CHAIR: Mayor, you have given us a community profile. Would you like to have that tabled at this hearing for the record?

Mr Hall: Yes. This is our advocacy document that we have presented. It outlines the three key strategic things that we want to achieve. First and foremost on that is the funding request for Eromanga Natural History Museum stage 3. It outlines our objectives and the outcomes that we have to achieve through that.

CHAIR: You would like that tabled?

Mr Hall: Yes, please.

CHAIR: The last part of our hearing today will be contributions from the floor. Two individuals have indicated that they would like to speak to the hearing. I call forward Mrs Jane Pike and Mr Tom Meakin.

MEAKIN, Mr Tom, Private capacity

PIKE, Mrs Jane, Private capacity

CHAIR: Welcome. Mrs Pike, I understand you are a long-term local here and you would like to put forward your point of your view. Mr Meakin, I hear that you are a tourist, so it would be good to hear what you have experienced here. Mrs Pike, I will ask you to talk about your experiences here in Quilpie.

Mrs Pike: I am born and bred in the Quilpie district. I now live in Eulo. I watched the Eromanga Natural History Museum come from nothing to where it is today and I just think it is such an incredible achievement for South-West Queensland, for all of us, for tourism particularly. I would like to speak on what I experience in Eulo. The biggest problem that I see is lack of advertising. When I go down to the hotel on a Friday night, when the tourists are really running it is nothing for the chef at the hotel to do anything from 70 to 100 meals a night. It absolutely astounds me that those tourists who come and stay in Eulo have such a lack of knowledge of the Eromanga Natural History Museum, because it is such a perfect loop.

A lot of the tourists take a week or 10 days off, hitch up the caravan and come out to Dalby, St George, Cunnamulla and Eulo and overnight on the Paroo because there is lots of free camping there, but they have no idea what the Eromanga Natural History Museum is. Robyn and Stuart will kill me, but I often think it could perhaps one day have a name that is more descriptive of what it is, and I think you will understand this when you see it. We just say to the people that they can go from Eulo to Thargomindah and Eromanga on a bitumen road, which is what 85 per cent of them want; they want a good road. A number of people, after they have been to Eromanga, have either rung us up or come back to Quilpie and zipped back to Toompine and then to Eulo just to thank us and say how absolutely astounded they were and what they learned. You will see an experience out there that I guarantee you will not see anywhere else in Queensland—well and truly. I would just love you guys who live in the tower of power in Brisbane to dig deep and find some money for these good people because—

CHAIR: I can tell you, Mrs Pike, that all three of the committee members here are regional members.

Mr SKELTON: Not as regional or rural as you. We are further east, obviously.

Mrs Pike: I would just love to see some money for advertising for South-West Queensland, especially as Stuart has said there are so few of us. We really do need it. We need the tourists because tourists lead in more private enterprise, more development, an increase in population. You can see here the fantastic job done by the Quilpie Shire Council in housing, in employment. What is the average age, Stuart, of your district? The average age of the whole district, rural and town, is 43.

CHAIR: That is good.

Mrs Pike: Thank the council, not me; I am only the old duck. We want you to go back. We want you to squeeze Mr Miles and please find some money because they really need it and we need it.

Mr BENNETT: That was very thoughtful. I hear you.

CHAIR: We are listening. Mr Meakin, as a tourist, what has your experience been like?

Mr Meakin: I am what you might classify as a professional tourist. Personally and professionally, I have visited over 53 countries in the world, every continent and both poles. My favourite place to travel is the outback of Queensland. There is probably not a town that we have not visited in Outback Queensland. My wife and I and our family have been travelling out here for over 35 years. We started with a tent, we went to the camper trailer, we went to a motorhome and now we are back to the caravan. It is just the openness and freedom of the outback which really appeals to us.

There are three types of tourists: the ones who like everything planned for them, who want to go on the bus trip and do all those sorts of things; the detailed planners—and we have one of them in our family, a relative, who has to have everything organised every day; and then us, which is a general plan, flexibility, see what we like to do. All of those people need information about what they are going to do. In Queensland we already have some great publications like the Matilda Way. I do not know if you have seen it. Here we have a road that goes through Central Queensland, and all the shires and towns have put a little bit in there to say what the attraction is. This road map is what they are talking about; it is a similar sort of thing but for palaeontology.

We have been lucky. I worked out that this is about our 22nd visit to Quilpie. We just came out for the opera that was here on Saturday night. We came out last year for the opera but this year we did a little detour and went by Rubyvale and Tambo. We always change it and we make it a special purpose to go and stay in a lot of these little places. A lot of the shires have done a tremendous job providing free camping facilities. When you are self-contained, that is so much more appealing than the 'wham, bam, thank you, ma'am' caravan parks that just stuff you in the corners. All of those tourists need a plan and I think that is a key thing. We would drift into information centres and pick up the brochure and say, 'Look, we can go and do this.'

We have been very fortunate. We have been coming here for 20 years. When Robyn and Stuart first found the dinosaurs on the property out there, we had the opportunity to go and see the really early things when they just built a shed and had these first things involved. We watched it grow over the years and we have visited the new museum out here probably three or four times. It is something that we like to do and visit again.

Richmond has a fantastic display up there with the marine fossils. Out here has the megafauna from the Eulo area. You would be amazed at how many people in the world are fascinated by dinosaurs. I have a friend who is currently driving from Seattle to Wisconsin in the United States and he is telling me about the fossils. They make a big thing in Wyoming about dinosaurs and fossils but you need to get that information out.

I am a great supporter of anything that promotes our outback because our outback is fantastic. A lot of people do not realise even throughout the world the freedom that we have as Australians to be able to move about, to stay here, to stay there. We do not need a permit here, we do not need permission here, you do not have to take your passport, you are not crossing boundaries. We are even allowed to get into New South Wales! Thank God we get to come back.

The point is that freedom of movement gives people choices; they can do things. We have had a lot of presentations today about promoting that thing. I am a recipient and I would like to know where all of these places are. We have been to Lark Quarry, we have been to Richmond, we have been to Eromanga, we have been to Eulo. One we have not been to in detail is the Winton one but it is on our bucket list and we will get there. Anything that ties all of those together and promotes it as a particular adventure would be the sort of thing they need, and obviously they all need money.

The shires have been doing a great thing by us tourists. When I first came out here, Quilpie did not even have a dump point. Now it has a dump point and a fuel station and these sorts of things. You go to all of these shires and they are all building those little things. I know there is one on the Jundah Road where you pull up and it is a rest area and it has a dump point in the rest area. If you do a 360-degree turn, all you see is grass. There is not a tree in sight. In the middle of nowhere, here is a council provided facility. Those sorts of things are being built by the shires and we just need to attract people like us out here to come and spend our money.

CHAIR: Thank you. That is a very good statement. Are there any questions?

Mr BENNETT: No, just keep coming.

Mr Meakin: We will.

CHAIR: Thank you. We really appreciate you making comments to the hearing. It is good to hear from a tourist's perspective what you see and how you feel. The message coming from you is about the provision of information and making sure people know what attractions are out here.

Mr Meakin: I classify myself as a casual tourist because we always have a concept planned. We hear that there is an opera in Quilpie so we think about what we can do around that. We might make a detailed plan which is always casual. We are camped at Lake Houdraman at the moment. We thought we would stay there a couple of nights, but we are going to stay a couple of nights more. That is the flexibility of it. I know Robyn's long-term plan is to have a camping area right near the Eromanga Natural History Museum. We will be there.

CHAIR: Thank you, Tom, for your comments. That concludes today's hearing. I would like to thank everybody who has participated today. I thank our Hansard reporter who has been with us today. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this public hearing closed.

The subcommittee adjourned at 3.26 pm.