

Scott Hocknull enthral a group of school children with a display of fossils



## PALAEONTOLOGY WEEK AT NARACOORTE

- Steve Bourne

Scott Hocknull launching Palaeo Week to eight visiting journalists to Naracoorte.

almost certainly have input from several states next year.



The week was supported by the South Australian Tourism Commission to the tune of \$10,000 through their regional events funding program. It is part of SATC's desire to further develop fossil-based and geological tourism, but more of that later.

The South Australian Museum and Naracoorte Caves held activities at each site for the week, commencing with the opening of stage two of the Origin Energy Fossil Gallery, the Ediacaran Fossil Gallery at the SA Museum on Friday 27 May. An official launch was held there on Saturday 28, while Naracoorte Caves hosted eight journalists for the day in conjunction with Limestone Coast Tourism and held a small launch of our own.

Last year I reported on the first road show of the South Australian Museum to Naracoorte Caves NP. This year we were able to build on the solid foundation with a second road show and through introducing the concept of Palaeontology Week.

The Week was proposed as a way to promote the rich fossil heritage of Naracoorte Caves obviously, but with the view of building it up in subsequent years to cover the state and the possibility of establishing a nationally recognised week. In its first year, it has exceeded expectations and will

A number of visiting palaeontologists were attracted to South Australia for the week, with Dr John Long from the Western Australian Museum, Dr Tom Rich from Museum Victoria, Young Australian of the Year 2002, Scott Hocknull from the Queensland Museum and of course Prof Rod Wells of Flinders University participating. It was unfortunate that commitments kept the Australian Museum's Dr Alex Ritchie and SA Museum Director, Dr Tim Flannery from attending and creating absolutely first class representation of Australia's palaeontologists. We also had our own

Dr Liz Reed and Dr Gavin Prideaux, who is nearing completion of his research project in Cathedral Cave. Scott spent the whole week at Naracoorte, making several significant contributions. He launched Palaeontology Week on Saturday and spent the whole day with our visiting journalists.

On Tuesday evening, he enlightened a small crowd on the value of palaeo-tourism to outback Queensland in a special talk in Blanche Cave. Scott is extremely ambitious and highly motivated and is some way along the same track of developing fossil tourism as we are in South Australia. Visitors who took a tour of Victoria Fossil Cave during the week were invited back to the fossil laboratory, where Scott and Liz Reed gave talks and displayed some fossil material.

At Naracoorte, the real action was underway on Thursday and Friday, with over 1100 school children participating in a special program of activities over two days. Friday was an especially significant day, with every primary school student from Naracoorte in attendance, over 700 in total.

The closing performance of the 'Valley of the Dinosaurs' by entertainer Michael Mills (aka Prof Flint) with seven hundred energetic school children created a sight and atmosphere that needed to be seen to be appreciated. Being able to accommodate all of Naracoorte's schoolchildren contributed to strengthening the community support from Naracoorte for the Park and culminated several weeks of activities for local schools built around Palaeontology Week.

In conjunction with the SA Museum, we established a buddy school system, whereby schools from around the state that are near fossil sites could participate in online programs. We also offered a range of suggestions, but were staggered by the extent to which schools took them up.

The best effort was probably that of the Naracoorte South Primary School, which developed a term of learning around invertebrate fossils found in the limestone of the Naracoorte region.

They began with a visit to Naracoorte Caves, where staff showed them fossils in situ in caves, taught them how to make casts of shells and provided a key to identification of specimens. They then visited a local quarry on a collecting trip. Their fossil museum was not however, merely a collection of specimens.

The students identified each specimen, produced data tags, traffic flows, used multi media with a

power point presentation and the Naracoorte Caves website live -all the components of a 'real' museum. After I had the honour of opening the museum, several of us had the pleasure of a guided tour led by extremely enthusiastic students.

Saturday 3 April was promoted as a 'Fossilised Family Fun Day' and attracted about eight hundred people. We were hoping for a slightly larger crowd, but having all of Naracoorte's primary school age children the day before no doubt affected the attendance.

There were many highlights for the week and we managed to achieve most of the goals we set ourselves. Some of the other highlights included special sessions for high school students conducted by our visiting palaeontologists, special tours of Victoria Fossil Cave by co-discoverers Dr. Grant Gartrell and Professor Rod Wells (it was unfortunate that the third member of the discovery party, Bob Henzel had to withdraw at the last minute) and a fantastic dinner and debate on Saturday evening. The weight of local support was enough for Liz Reed to be declared the winner of the debate while the appearance of Fred and Wilma Flintstone surprised everyone. (Having hair again was a whole new experience, but the photos shall have to remain hidden!!)

Palaeontology Week was a success on many levels for Naracoorte Caves. We generated local support and interest, it gave guiding staff a change from regular daily tours and the chance to meet some of Australia's leading palaeontologists who in turn are enthusiastic about taking the concept back to their home states and further strengthened our partnership with the SA Museum.

It also gave us a platform to continue to develop fossil-based and geological tourism, for which our Minister for Tourism, Jane Lomax-Smith has a real passion. (We recently had the pleasure of hosting her and her family on a private visit for a day. The support she has provided for Naracoorte Caves, both financial and through various media is significant and having a positive effect.)

A feasibility study has been undertaken and a business plan completed and is now in the process of being implemented by a steering committee made up of stakeholders from various agencies. While it could take time before we see the benefits of greater visitor numbers flowing through, some excellent propositions for interpretation and infrastructure have been put forward. And maybe some funding may follow!



Seven hundred Naracoorte primary school children enjoying the Professor Flint performance.