

New Zealand Fossils: Dead Precious! – geology on display

Meredith Robertshawe is pleased to see a comprehensive travelling exhibition showcasing the fossil heritage that is usually housed in research collections and less readily available to the public

This enthralling exhibition, recently opened at Puke Ariki, explores New Zealand fossils and their place in our history, geography and scientific development (*figure 1*). “To stimulate people’s fascination with fossils” is one of the aims of the exhibition, according to Dr. Hamish Campbell of GNS Science, allowing people to discover the strange, exquisite beauty of fossils, their use, and sometimes dangerous appeal – imagine swimming with a shark-toothed dolphin or coming across a giant marine lizard at the beach in prehistoric New Zealand!

ROCKS ON THE ROAD

A nationally touring exhibition, *Dead Precious!* is a joint project two years in the making. Project-managed by Jude Benson, GNS Science was the project’s main instigator, drawing on the expertise and collection at the Otago University Geology Department. Each museum that hosts the exhibition also has the opportunity to include fossils from their own collections or from other local, private collectors. Along with generous funding from Shell and support from Joule and the International Year Of Planet Earth New Zealand Committee, this exhibition is a ‘perfect partnership’, combining the best of paleontological knowledge and industry sponsorship within a museum forum to bring this engaging exhibition out of the lab and into the public eye.

INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES

New Zealand has a world famous fossil record, with the ‘valuable time-capsules’ on display being absolutely world class. From ancient ammonites with beautiful crystals inside them to giant, toothy marine lizards, scallop and crab shells, to ancient ferns and worm burrows, these are stunning examples of the intricate details the land can hold within it.

Different ways of engaging the audience are employed within this exhibition: videos of fossil discovery, written information, historic footage, photographs of fossils and sites, a comprehensive computer research database, a children’s corner with squashy cushions and books. Of course, the fossils themselves continue to fascinate people of all ages, evoking a surreal past and a very different picture of our world (*figure 2*).

As with many exhibitions that are by nature scientific, technical or deal with huge time scales, one of the main challenges is presenting these specimens in an accessible

Figure 1. Overview of the exhibition *New Zealand Fossils: Dead Precious!* on show at Puke Ariki in New Plymouth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PUKE ARIKI





Figure 2. **Issues of scale. A close encounter with a giant ammonite (cast).** ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PUKE ARIKI

way to reach a wide audience without “dumbing it down”. The layout and language of the exhibition is a crucial tool to this understanding. This exhibition does an effective job of linking fossils to real significance in today’s world, providing direct examples of how they are used in earthquake movement, in oil exploration and as climate indicators. However, some of the layout seems mismatched with information, with the fossils referred to being in different places. Some common names are not provided for visually unrecognisable fossils. In addition, the geological timescale shown would be hard for anyone who was not a geologist to make sense of. In this way, some pieces of the puzzle are missing, relying on the visitor to (hopefully) make the connections as they move around the exhibition (figure 3). Written information is both scientific and general, and although it sometimes misses that connection to people’s everyday experience, it is relatively easy to understand.

A BALANCING ACT

This is the fine line between ‘stimulating’ and ‘telling’, and is backed up with an informative map with pictures and stories provided to visitors as well as very accessible information, such as videos of palaeontologists talking about what they do in simple terms, interspersed with children’s ideas of what a fossil is and why they like them. 3-Dimensional recreations showing how these fossil animals would have looked and acted in ancient lands also effectively bridge any gaps.

Supplementing the beautifully packaged and comprehensive education boxes that travel with the exhibition, Puke Ariki staff have put together a range of supporting events, from visiting scientists talking about how fossils affect our lives, education packs with maps and stories for school visits, art programmes and fossil hunts, to link-ins with local Geological Society members available to talk rocks with people.

SURFACING THE SUBTERRANEAN

Although different museums across New Zealand showcase some local and national fossils, this comprehensive exhibition is a one of a kind, especially with the fossil-specific *Once were Dinosaurs* exhibition no longer on show, although about to be re-installed in the National Aquarium of New Zealand in Napier.

Dead Precious! Where ancient fossils in clear cases are lit up like precious jewels, dark, black walls with golden-hued fossil images create an almost luxurious sense of discovery as you walk and wonder at how, from the darkness of the earth, these remains of other-worldly creatures have again come to light.



Figure 3. **Jaw-dropping experience with one of the exhibition’s toothsome fossils!** ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PUKE ARIKI

Meredith Robertshawe has recently taken up the role of District Heritage Curator of the South Taranaki District Museum. A love of geology and archaeology has led her from excavations in Ireland to the oil industry in Taranaki. Now based in Patea, she is inspired by new ways of celebrating stories of the land and the people, and going fossi- hunting on the beaches. She is a geology graduate from Victoria University of Wellington who has also worked in the oil industry.

New Zealand Fossils: Dead precious! will be touring New Zealand museums for three years. Puke Ariki was its opening venue.