


RURAL WEEKLY


Australian Age of Dinosaurs faces a tough winter

The economies of rural towns across Outback Queensland rely on a winter influx of visitors to attractions like Winton's Australian Age of Dinosaurs, but how does the beloved museum survive coronavirus close-down?

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 Australian Age of Dinosaurs collection manager Trish Sloan. Picture: Contributed

IT'S the Easter holidays, and Winton should be enjoying its peak winter tourist season. The Jump Up should be teeming with the chatter of excited, dino-loving families as they explore one of the town's main attractions – the outstanding Australian Age of Dinosaurs museum park.

But this year, it has fallen silent, closed because of coronavirus restrictions. Volunteer travellers, usually painstakingly and passionately etching out ancient dinosaur fossils have had to leave, and a skeleton crew of staff carry on the work.

It's a problem challenging attractions and events across western Queensland, with the regional economies reliant on a busy, bright winter and almost no tourist trade across the scorching summers.

Economic development bodies and councils across the state's west are calling for a specialised support package for outback industries amid government COVID-19 spending, recognising the particular, seasonal needs of the region will extend well into 2021.

AAOD executive chairman David Elliott, the grazier who founded the museum with wife Judy after finding well-preserved fossils on their station, said the operation factored in running at a loss over summer.

"The next six months are peak tourist season. If this (virus) had happened six months ago, it would not have been so bad. We can hope restrictions are lifted in June, then we might get some travellers coming through at the end of the season," he said.

"We usually run at a loss over summer, but without some support or some visitors at the end of the season, there will be nothing left in the bikkie tin, not if we have to go 12 months without income.

"We would need at least 50 per cent of wages from government support to keep our staff going. We can borrow to keep working on attractions but not to pay staff. It will be very tight."

The innovative museum, a seeker in Australia's deep history, has been working on new attractions, including an observatory with interpretative features like indigenous astronomy and site for astronomy enthusiasts to set up their own telescopes, all part of the park's status as a UNESCO Dark Sky Sanctuary. They have also been working to shift a sauropod trackway located on a station to the west of Winton, to the protection of a conservatory being constructed now at AAOD. It is hoped both will open in April next year. Contract work on the trackway has now been suspended.

AAOD collections manager Trish Sloan has just celebrated 12 years with the museum, beginning as a fossil technician on the Elliott's Belmont Station in AAOD's earliest days.

"Back then, I was prepping dinosaur bones in their motorbike shed," Trish said.

Trish has a deep concern for her "dinosaur family" of staff and volunteers. She said the volunteers would, in normal times, number up to 12 in the fossil lab, prepping dinosaur bones, or helping in other areas of the operation.



Australian Age of Dinosaurs founder and executive chairman, Winton grazier David Elliott.

"But it's pretty quiet here now, all our volunteers have been told to stay at home."

Trish said vollies were vital, with many returning year after year.

"They are up there with our staff, they're extremely important. We rely on voluntary support from people all over Australia and Winton locals: whoever wants to help us. It is a really big part of who we are. Without them, we wouldn't have finished, prepared dinosaur bones, the trackway as it is now. Even David has never been paid a salary since he started 25 years ago."

She estimated AAOD had lost more than \$100,000 already just by closing its doors a few weeks ago, a combination of lost revenue and meeting costs.

"We want to pay our staff, we want to look after them. We had just put together some survival packages for our staff, we want to keep them afloat, being able to pay their rent and so on," she said.

Trish said they were pleased to hear of the Federal Government's JobKeeper allowance, and were exploring that.

"A lot of our staff live pay to pay: it's not a job that pays highly, and they are here for the museum, not the money, which is why we've got to look after them," she said.

"We are alternating them around through a roster system, so that there is only a couple at a time coming in, and we can abide by the (distancing) rules and regulations."

People can support the museum during this time through memberships, its online shop, and livestreams on Facebook.



Work is under way to gently shift the wonderfully preserved sauropod trackway from a grazing property west

