

Chinese fossils find their way back home



More than 3,000 Chinese dinosaur fossils seized by the Australian Federal Police were officially handed over to the Government of the People's Republic of China in September.

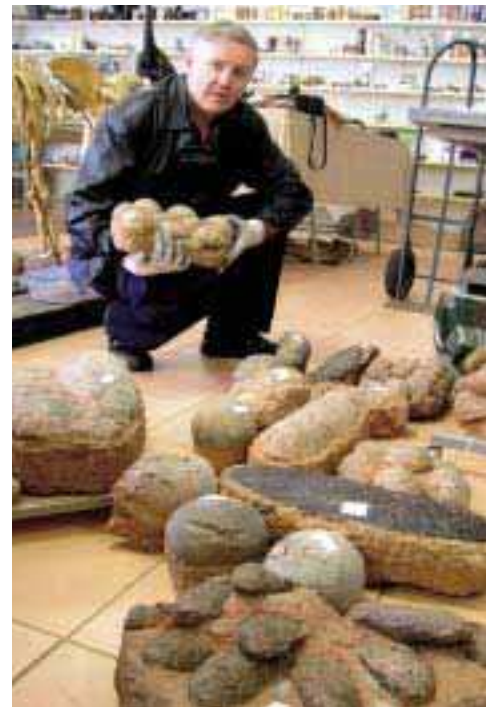
The initial AFP investigation began in May 2004 with a request from the Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH) to recover illegally exported dinosaur fossils. This request was made to enable the fossils to be returned to Chinese authorities in accordance with the 1970 UNESCO convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property.

The Chinese authorities also requested official assistance from Australia to seize any fossils and dinosaur eggs imported into Australia under Section 14(2) of the *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986*.

On 14 June 2004 federal agents executed three warrants on a residential premises at Lake Clifton Western Australia and on two retail stores in Perth Central Business District and Subiaco. In excess of 3000 separate items were seized.

The search warrant on the premises at Lake Clifton lasted more than two days due to the time of recording and packing the items. The nature of the items also required a professional removalist company, who specialised in fragile and valuable items, to be contracted to pack and transport the items for storage at the Australian Customs Service container facility in Fremantle.

During the search warrants, one of the pre-eminent experts in dinosaur fossils, palaeontologist Dr John Long from the Western Australian Museum, was used to help identify items to be seized.



Federal Agent Vic Susinetti with a load of seized fossils in the south west of Western Australia

Photos by Justine Adamek

Consideration was then given to pursuing a prosecution against the owners of the items for importing fossils unlawfully exported from China. Following consultation with the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions it was determined that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute the owners.

While the investigation did not result in a prosecution, a number of positive outcomes were achieved. These included the forging of a relationship between the Australian and the Chinese Governments for the enforcement of cultural heritage items and public awareness generated by the investigation.

In appreciation of the AFP's efforts in recovering and returning the fossils to China, the Chinese Government donated a number of rare and valuable items to Australia.