

Why we need dinos

The \$12m skeletons are worth having for their power to inspire and awe



Ignatius Low

Last week, I went online and donated \$300 towards the new natural history museum's purchase of a family of three full-sized dinosaur skeletons that will cost \$12 million.

When I told some friends and colleagues about it, I was genuinely surprised at their dismay.

"Waste money!" was one friend's emphatic response. "I can think of a hundred ways to better use the funds."

A colleague in the newsroom was more considered. Why do museums have to resort to such "blockbuster" tactics to bring in the crowds, she asked.

The Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, which is what the new natural history museum is called, already has a wonderful collection of South-east Asian specimens, she argued.

Dinosaur bones from Wyoming in the United States would be out of place conceptually. And \$12 million is not a small sum, either, she added. This could be better used to improve the facilities of the museum or fund outreach programmes.

Gee whiz, I thought to myself. I clearly hadn't considered any of that.

"But, but, it would be so cool!" is now my standard, stammering defence for taking the low road, for the crime I had clearly committed against artistic integrity.

I guess I was just thinking about the feeling of absolute wonder and amazement a child would feel walking into a huge sunlit hall one day and coming into contact with these giant creatures from an almost unfathomable past.

I could imagine the questions he or she would ask.

"What sort of dinosaurs are these?"

Oh, they are diplodocid sauropods, famous for having super long necks and

even longer tails.

"Cool! What did they eat?"

They ate only plants. But to help digestion, they ate stones that would grind the food in their stomachs. This is what chickens today do.

"Wow! How old are they?"

145 million to 155 million years old. When they were around, plants hadn't even evolved to have flowers yet.

"Whoa! Are they really a family? So cute."

Yep, the kid's dad might say with a smile.

Just like we are.

Okay, I admit that I'm dramatising this Steven Spielberg-style for full "wide-eyed wonder" effect, so let's get down to the tough questions.

Will such an exhibit bring in tourists?

For sure, it will. And they will help stimulate the local economy in the process.

But is such an exhibit just for tourists?

Clearly not, as long as we keep entry prices reasonable. And this is where the donations come in.

If the dinosaurs are fully paid for by donors, then they arrive effectively free of charge to the museum, which can then show them at a minimal fee to visitors. In fact, Singaporeans will benefit much more from having the dinosaur exhibits on their doorstep, than tourists who can afford to travel the world.

The nearest country Singaporeans would have to travel to to see something similar would be Thailand, in two museums located in obscure small towns in the north-east of the country.

Beyond that, there are exhibits in popular holiday destinations such as Japan and the US, but they are again located in far-flung places, typically where the remains were excavated.

But economics aside, the argument comes down to whether a bunch of dinosaur skeletons is something really worth having in a small plot of land in western Singapore.

My answer would be yes, for two reasons. The first has something to do with the power to inspire, much underrated in today's cost-benefit crazy society.

Nearly every interview I have read with a world-famous creator - be it a scientist, musician or architect - contains a little story about something he or she had seen as a



ILLUSTRATION: MIKE M DIZON

child or as an impressionable youth.

That thing that they saw sparked something so strong in them that they eventually ended up eschewing the safer paths and careers in life of being a banker, an accountant or some other type of cog in the world's corporate machinery.

To me, the massive remains of creatures that are more than a hundred million years old may well be the springboard to our youngsters developing careers not just in paleontology (which will no longer be that obscure thing that the character Ross in the classic sitcom Friends studied).

They could also be inspired to become biologists, geologists and earth scientists, even historians and journalists.

Others might be struck by their encounter with the dinosaurs in a different way and base music, paintings, books or plays on what they saw.

The second reason why the dinosaurs would be worth having is that they would be one of those displays that will give Singaporeans a sense of their place not just in the world, but also in time.

We live in a fast-paced global city of commerce where the next transaction, event, project or career move is often all that we have on the horizon.

Few things in this world would give us a more instant perspective on life than standing there, all tiny, next to some of the biggest creatures that once roamed the earth but were suddenly extinguished by Nature.

In fact, my view is that there are not enough experiences like that in Singapore that have the power to give us pause and make us think about who or what we are for a change - not just what we are meant to do next.

This is why, in the current debate over the preservation of the old KTM railway land, I am on the side of those who prefer to keep things as they are.

And even though former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has expressed his preference for his home to be eventually demolished, I hope that he will re-consider.

Yes, curious tourists will traipse through these sites and take a million meaningless photographs.

But so many more Singaporeans of tomorrow will stand on the tracks and remember that this nation was once a part of Malaysia.

And they will look around the basement of the Oxley Road house in wonder, imagining the tense meetings the founding fathers had at modern Singapore's birth.

It is for all these silly reasons that I wish that the three dinosaurs do eventually make their way here.

And when they do, my claim to fame in the decades to come will be that I was just, in that very small way, proudly responsible.

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Should Singapore buy the dinosaur skeletons? Send your views to suntimes@sph.com.sg