Everyone digs our dinosaurs
Surf Coast Jurassic Park a rich resource

There’s a future in fossils, reports Noel Murphy

SURF Coast, the Shipwreck Coast, the Great Ocean Road, whale nursery — there’s no shortage of monikers for the world-renowned Otway Ranges littoral that have served admirably as shingles to lure tourists from around the world.

But with Asian visitors shying away from the area, victims of swine flu fears or hard times, it’s interesting that recent palaeontological finds are drawing new attention to the Surf Coast/Ocean Road/Otways area.

It may be worth the Surf Coast, neighbouring councils and regional tourist authorities thinking about foreign exchange — the tourist yen, yuan, greenback and dong — to be garnered from prehistoric tourism.

Why? Because the coast is a goldmine — scientifically and economically.

Dinosaur burrows 110 million years old have been found at Knowledge Creek near Apollo Bay by Monash University scientists in the past two years.

Three 25 million-year-old whale fossils have been found near Bells Beach in the past month.

Museum Victoria personnel are poring over them.

A fossilised Oligocene era whale skull, Janjucetus, was found near the suburb of the same name in the 1990s.

The extraordinary cliff-face Cretaceous era hatchery of Dinosaur Cove, near Cape Otway and worked over by scientists in the 1970s and ’80s, hosted the richest diversity of animal fossil samples ever found in Australia.

Indeed, the latest Surf Coast findings are really just icing on the cake of Dinosaur Cove, which in world terms helped re-write how scientists thought of dinosaurs.

Other countries have been tapping dinosaur tourism for some time.

Locations include the aptly-named Dinosaur in Colorado, Lake Barreales, in Argentina’s Patagonia and Canada’s “Dinosaur Capital”, Drumheller, in Alberta.

Along the Otway coast, Dinosaur Cove was a menagerie, but it’s been forgotten or overlooked by those charged with drumming up tourist interest in the Otway coast and its hinterland.

It’s been recognised the world over as Jurassic Park-style nursery crawling with velociraptors, flying pterosaurs, underwater plesiosaurs, oviraptors, primeval crocodiles, turtles, upright relatives of echidnas and platypus — long before the megafauna versions that roamed the hinterland, leaving behind all manner of tracks and trails ... but that’s another story.

The people responsible for Dinosaur Cove were Monash’s Patricia Vickers-Rich and husband Tom Rich, of Museum Victoria.

One dinosaur found at the site, and named Leaellynasaurus, after the Rich’s daughter, Leaellyn, now a Melbourne solicitor, is the Victorian official fossil emblem. Her brother Tim, had Timimus named after him — that dinosaur was like an ostrich up to 2.5m tall.

Of course 160 million years back is going back a long way from the metropolis of Melbourne, it’s an opportunity that shouldn’t be left to go begging.

Scientists such as Queensland palaeontologist Steven Salisbury, of Brisbane’s University of Queensland, who doesn’t agree with the Rich’s theories about Dinosaur Cove and who has argued in recent years that Australia was dinosaur stamping ground in its own right...

Academic debate may be a tough subject for some, but there’s no doubt numerous youngsters are more than besotted by dinosaurs — as much as whales or shipwrecks — and that their influence over the expenditure of tourism dollars by their parents is considerable.

Nor is there doubt schools around the state, let alone the nation, may be intrigued by the prehistoric struggle for ascendancy unfolding along our shores.

In a rapidly-growing region such as the Surf Coast, ever keen for new employment opportunities for the wealth of youngsters growing up far from the metropolis of Melbourne, it’s an opportunity that shouldn’t be left to go begging.

You’d have to be a dinosaur to think otherwise.
Quite a find: Tom Rich at Dinosaur Cove

Bone zone: Argentina has tapped into dinosaur tourism.

Diverse riches: Workers pursue spectacular finds at Dinosaur Cove