

What to do if you find fossils or artifacts

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A trilobite fossil, *Redlichia rex* found at Emu Bay, Kangaroo Island – a marine creature that lived over 500 million years ago during the Cambrian period.

Credit: Macquarie University

Six years ago, grazier Robert Hacon was driving around his cattle property in outback Queensland when he drove over what he thought was a cow skull.

When he turned his ute around, on the ground in front of him lay the 1.6

meter jaw bone of a *Kronosaurus queenslandicus*—an 11-meter-long marine creature with a crocodile-like head that lived about 100 million years ago. It turned out to be the most intact *Kronosaurus* jawbone ever found.

A year later, [construction workers](#) building Sydney's light rail in Randwick uncovered tens of thousands of spearheads and tools used by Bidjigal or Gadigal peoples of the Eora nation, including evidence they traded with people from what is now the Hunter Valley.

So what should you do if you stumble on a fossil or an Indigenous artifact in your backyard, at the beach, in a local park, on a bushwalk or on a rural property?

Macquarie University Biological Sciences Masters student Sally Hurst is trying to answer these questions. She's created a website [Found a Fossil](#) to inform people what steps to take, who to contact and what your rights are over ownership of the fossil or artifact.

Honorary Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences, Glenn Brock, says the site will potentially engage thousands of people around Australia online who might have found an important fossil or an artifact and are not sure what to do next.

"It greatly improves our chances that more finds will end up in the hands of scientists who'll recognize their significance," says Brock who supervised Hurst during the project.

The website is part of Hurst's research which includes surveying people's attitudes to fossils and artifacts Australia-wide.

"There's a huge gap in knowledge and information and so I saw it as an opportunity to do something," Hurst says. "I'm passionate about

paleontology, archaeology and also an enthusiastic science communicator and this project has combined all my interests."

What most intrigues Hurst is that through her website she's engaging members of the public to become citizen scientists. She encourages them to photograph, record the GPS location, determine if there's other similar objects nearby and then report their find.

"Fossils are really important," Hurst says. "They give us information about the evolution and extinction of plant and animal species. They also tell us about our changing environment. We need to understand this to adapt to future changes." Similarly, learning about artifacts deepens our understanding of our shared culture and our history.

Own the land, own the fossil

The good news is that if you find a fossil on your private property in NSW, then you own it and you can decide what to do with it, says Hurst. "But you still should inform your local council or museum, because if it's a rare find, then it will contribute to our scientific knowledge."

Also, it's important to report it for preservation purposes. "If it's been in the ground for a long time and then a storm or some kind of digging disturbs it, and it's suddenly exposed to the air, it could rapidly deteriorate. A museum will know how best to take care of it," she says.

If you discover the fossil in a national park, on a beach or someone else's private property then you'll have to get the landowner's permission for what to do next.

Spread the knowledge

Finding a cultural artifact involves similar steps, Hurst says. After growing up on a property in central NSW, Hurst knew of many farmers who had a box full of Aboriginal stone tools at the back of a cupboard, unsure of who to talk to about it.

"If you find an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artifact on your property it does not affect your land ownership at all—you're just encouraged not to disturb it as it's part of the oldest living culture and people want to interpret it. So the best thing is to inform your local council or Indigenous community."

On her website, Hurst also includes contact details to report or donate your discovery to the Australian Museum and different state museums, as well state cultural heritage guidelines and sites. It also links you to [Fossils Australia](#) to identify your fossil.

To further inform her website content, Hurst is conducting a survey of Macquarie University students to find out what they would do if they found a fossil or artifact. Early next year, she'll launch an Australia-wide survey as part of her Masters project to gather information about what people would do if they did find something.

"My hope is that this project, and the website resources, will contribute towards the protection of Australia's natural and cultural heritage for the future," she says.

Visit [Found a Fossil](#) if you have found a fossil or artifact and would like more information on what to do next.

Provided by Macquarie University

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