Herald Sun, Friday, June 18, 2004

# Police swoop on fossils

FOSSILS and dinosaur eggs up to 150 million years old have been seized by federal police during a raid on three properties.

The 1300 Chinese fossils are valued at more than $5 million, making the haul the largest ever in Australia.

Included in the 20-tonne seizure are fossils of dinosaurs, fish, tortoises and rhino skulls.

The director of the movable culture heritage unit of the Department of Environment and Heritage, Kevin Wohlers, said the haul was very large in global terms.

"The seizure included objects right across the fossil spectrum," he said.

"There were dinosaur eggs, nests of eggs, dinosaurs, fish."

The fossils were discovered about eight days ago when Australian Federal Police officer raided a home and two businesses at Mandurah south of Perth. Mr Wohlers said no charges had been laid.

When the Federal Police investigation has been completed, the matter will be referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions for consideration, he said.

Other investigations are also being conducted nationwide, he said, as a result of a request for help from Chinese authorities in June last year.

Australia and China are signatories to a UNESCO convention prohibiting illicit trade in fossils.

**Vivienne Oakley**

Mr Wohlers said anyone convicted of illegally importing fossils faced a maximum fine of $100,000 per item, or five years in jail. Corporations can be fined a maximum of $200,000 per item.

"Those penalties reflect how seriously the Australian government regards such matters," he said.

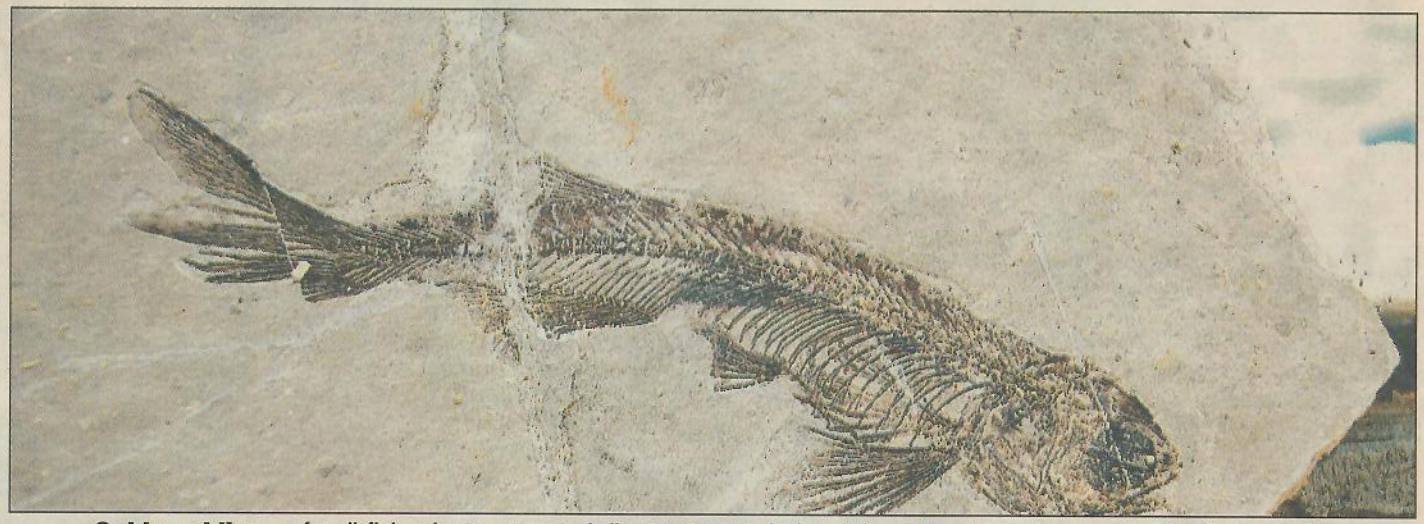
Since the items were seized, they have been inspected by expert paleontologists from the WA Museum. The curator of vertebrate paleontology, John Long, said he was "totally staggered" to see such a large collection in Western Australia.

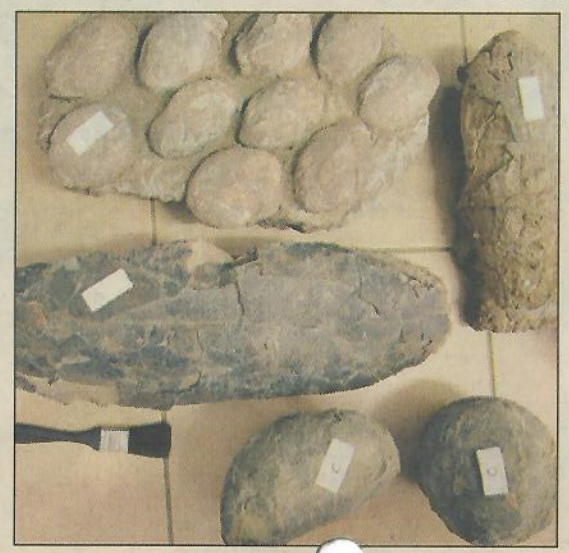
Dr Long, the author of a book on the illegal fossil trade called *The Dinosaur Dealers*, said there were probably 50 collectors in Australia who would spend more than $50,000 a year on fossils.

"The market in Australia is not that big, but globally it's huge," he said. "There are some spectacular specimens in this haul," he said.

It is expected the fossils will be returned to China once legal formalities have been completed.

Most are from the Chinese provinces of Laioning — regarded as one of the best spots in the world for dinosaur research.





**Golden oldies:** a fossil fish, above, assorted dinosaur eggs, below left, and various dinosaur fossils, below right.