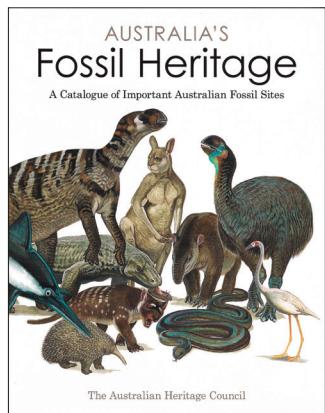


## Australia's Fossil Heritage: A Catalogue of Important Australian Fossil Sites by the Australian Heritage Council

2012. Collingwood, CSIRO Publishing, 188 pp.  
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I sincerely hope that is the case because there are many factual and interpretive errors in here about two sites that I have some familiarity with.

The book presents a snapshot of each fossil locality chosen for inclusion, averaging around 10 sites for each state—some more, some less. The sites were selected by palaeontologists, and other sites were added to these lists if deemed to be of national importance. As a result, some archaeological sites were also added, and a potted history of each location is provided.

I was especially interested because it included Cuddie Springs, a site I have spent 20 years investigating. As

it turns out, the discussion is misleading and mostly inaccurate, which is frustrating. The same could be said of the enthusiastic write-up of Devils Lair. It is clear that the investigators of both important sites were not asked to check the information presented here. It is very disappointing to see what could have been an informative book on these sites undermined by lack of attention to the basic facts, especially the very poor referencing of widely available published material. Cuddie Springs is presented as contentious without substantiation, while Devils Lair is described as one of the best localities in Australia to review human associations with megafauna. However, the last time I looked the evidence was equivocal for humans and megafauna being contemporary at Devils Lair. At one point the authors state that people were at Devils Lair from 30,000 to 8000 years ago, while in another they argue that they were there from 48,000 years ago. Not surprisingly, the citation list is wanting.

There are numerous impressive illustrations by Peter Schouten in an attempt to create visual impact and bring some of these scenes to life. The first diorama is of the Cuddie Springs site and I was immediately struck by the complete lack of environmental contextual accuracy in reconstructing the site during a time when megafauna were still around. I can only conclude that Peter Schouten did not refer to any of the site descriptions before embarking on this painting. I then wonder how inaccurate the rest of the reconstructions might be.

If the aim is to introduce the general public to a sample of the fossil history of Australia, then the book succeeds, albeit with many factual inaccuracies. The book might be of use to school-aged children trying to get a handle on the fossil history of Australia; if this was the case it would have benefited from having the illustrated timeline at the front of the book instead of hidden in an appendix at the back. The glossary was really useful and comprehensive and was perhaps the most substantive part of the book. *Australia's Fossil Heritage* looks like it was cobbled together with little attention to detail. On the one hand it is encouraging to see Australia's fossil history getting a positive profile in the popular press, on the other, it is really disappointing to see the significant shortcomings emanating from a simple lack of scholarship.