

Make a date with dinos

The creatures are waiting. Over 2,000 specimens to be exact, ranging from majestic dinosaur fossils to a bird in the collection of famed British naturalist Alfred Wallace,

will be on show to the public on April 28 at the new Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. **Chang Ai-Lien** takes a look inside, and checks out the book which tells its story.

>>>Early days

The idea of setting up a museum in Singapore goes back to 1823, when Sir Stamford Raffles founded the Singapore Institution.

Formally established as the Raffles Library and Museum in 1878, Singapore's natural history museum began life in Stamford Road in 1887, exhibiting preserved animal specimens from South-east Asia.

Over the years, it became known as the Raffles Museum and National Museum – which had collections of natural history, anthropology and art.

In 1972, after it split from the National Museum, it was often referred to as the Raffles Collection or the Raffles Natural History Collection. After it became ensconced in the Department of Zoology at the National University of Singapore, it became known as the Zoological Reference Collection and, from 1998, formed the core of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research.

Now it has found a permanent home at the new Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, where the displays, such as this one which includes crocodiles, and a Komodo dragon skeleton, are designed to evoke excitement and interest in the diversity of life. Rather than cluttering the displays with text, the researchers behind it created a special app that allows visitors to get details on each exhibit using their smartphones.

Source: *Of Whales And Dinosaurs*



Items on display at the new Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum include crocodiles and a Komodo dragon skeleton.

>>>The whale that got away

In 1892, the museum acquired a 42-foot (12.8m) skeleton of an Indian fin whale which died after being stranded near Malacca.

Lack of space at the museum prevented the skeleton from being properly mounted for display, and it remained in storage for the next 15 years.

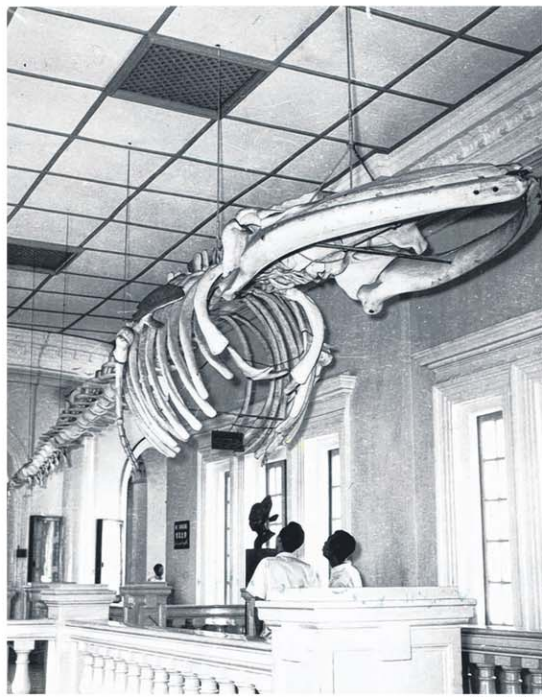
In 1907, the skeleton was finally mounted. Missing bones – a scapula, the “hands”, and several vertebrae and ribs – were modelled out of wood and plaster of paris and the whole skeleton “was suspended by steel ropes from the ceiling”.

When unveiled, it was undoubtedly “the most striking exhibit in the Zoological gallery”.

The museum now had on display a specimen of the world's largest creature in its galleries.

In May 1974, after the National Museum gave up its natural history collection to the Science Centre, the whale was taken down, dismantled into three pieces and sent by truck as a gift to the Muzium Negara (National Museum) in Kuala Lumpur.

Source: *Of Whales And Dinosaurs*



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PHOTO: DINOSAURIA INTERNATIONAL

Dino delights

Three dinosaurs will be the highlight of the museum.

Skeletons of the three diplodocid sauropods, some of the biggest creatures to walk on earth some 150 million years ago, were found together at a quarry in Wyoming in the United States, and are more than 80 per cent complete.

Two of them – Apollonia and Prince – were adults measuring 24m and 27m respectively from head to tail, while the baby dinosaur, Twinky, was 12m long. After they were uncovered, the bones were first

wrapped in paper towels and encased in a protective plaster and burlap cast. They were then moved to a lab where the casing was removed. Once the bones were exposed, the rock was chipped off, and a strengthening liquid was added to preserve and harden the fossils.

In Singapore, the bones were authenticated by putting them through CT scans. Then the dinosaurs were pieced together again on a custom-built frame, with missing pieces filled in with resin parts made from casts.



PHOTO: LIM YAOSHUI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Specimens on display at the upcoming Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, located next to the University Cultural Centre at the National University of Singapore, opens to the public on April 28.

It is home to more than half a million animal and plant specimens, both for research and education. And it is a place where art meets science.

Visitors will get to see more than 2,000 specimens in a spacious, light-infused setting, including a human skeleton, a king cobra killed on a golf course here, and a killer crab lurking on Singapore's shores. And they can come within arm's length of Prince, Apollonia and Twinky, the 150-million-year-old dinosaur fossils which are the stars of the show.

The 8,500 sq m museum was a labour of love by NUS professors Leo Tan and Peter Ng, who led efforts to build the facility and helped to raise \$46 million to make it happen.

The exhibits are mostly research specimens from the collection, as well as heritage displays from the old Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research and the old National Museum.

The exhibition gallery is divided into two floors of about 2,500 sq m. The main floor showcases the history and diversity of life on earth, with a strong focus on South-east Asian plants and animals.

On the mezzanine floor, the heritage gallery showcases plant and animal material from the original Raffles Museum, including many iconic Singapore specimens. The Singapore Today area features the geology of the island, and efforts to conserve its natural heritage.

Surrounding the museum are three specially designed gardens – the Phylogenetic (evolutionary history) Garden which tells the story of how plants and habitats have evolved; the Freshwater Swamp to Mangrove Forest section; and the Beach to Land area.

STORY OF HOW IT CAME ABOUT

The book, *Of Whales And Dinosaurs – The Story Of Singapore's Natural History Museum*, looks at how the sleek new museum at the National University of Singapore came into being.

It will be available at leading bookshops from next Sunday. It will sell for \$49.22, including GST.

The book is written by Dr Kevin Tan, who specialises in constitutional and administrative law, legal history, human rights and the Singapore legal system, and holds adjunct professorships at both the NUS faculty of law and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.

He has written and edited more than 30 books on the law, history and politics of Singapore.

At last

“It’s my dream come true.”

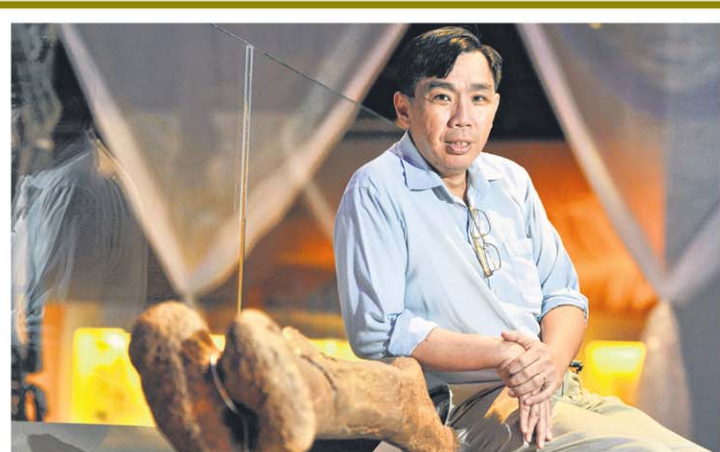
PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH, Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large and chairman of the museum's advisory board. The idea of a South-east Asian natural history museum was first conceived by Prof Koh in 2004. The museum has a “prehistoric” facade resembling a moss-covered rock.



Up close with the past

“We wanted to have parts of the gallery that people can touch and experience. We want people to get up close as much as possible. You can find anything on the Internet these days – we wanted them to feel, to experience the real thing. The excitement of being up close or touching something like that can't be explained.”

PROFESSOR PETER NG, head of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, seen here leaning on a dinosaur thigh bone. A dinosaur fossil and meteorite are among the items which visitors will be able to touch



PHOTOS: LIM YAOSHUI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES