

The Australian Museum - Rio Tinto partnership

A win-win situation for biodiversity and industry

“The relationship with Rio Tinto is allowing the Australian Museum to both build its collection material through new surveys, and make the collections more accessible by digitising existing material. Research made possible through the partnership should have real conservation outcomes while being useful to environmental managers and land planners. It’s a win-win situation for biodiversity and industry.”

Frank Howarth, chief executive officer, the Australian Museum

For biodiversity and sustainable development

Australia is a special place for biodiversity. Scientists estimate that the number of species that live in Australia adds up to more than twice that of Europe and North America combined. Not only is there a great diversity of life, there are many plants and animals unique to Australia.

The Australian Museum and Rio Tinto formed a partnership in 2003 to increase knowledge of Australia’s biodiversity by:

- Documenting native species.
- Identifying areas of conservation significance.
- Developing on-line biodiversity mapping programmes.
- Encouraging community participation in biodiversity research.

In 2003 the Australian Museum and Rio Tinto signed a five year partnership agreement to work together on developing a national biodiversity map. The partnership focuses on three key projects that aim to help balance economic productivity with biodiversity. By researching Australia’s flora and fauna outside Australia’s conservation reserves, the partnership is increasing Australia’s knowledge of biodiversity, and is investigating and testing how to apply this new knowledge to natural resource management.

By bringing science, industry and the community together, the partnership seeks to ensure that biodiversity conservation and human productivity are less at odds. The partnership is an example of how two very different organisations can find common goals and provide leadership in environmental responsibility by bringing together their skills and expertise.

The Australian Museum brings to the partnership a specialist skills base in biodiversity conservation, through taxonomy, survey, mapping and modelling. Rio Tinto is supporting the programme by providing financial resources, access to lands, and the skills and expertise of staff including environmental managers.

The three partnership projects are:

The National BioMaps programme

BioMaps – due for completion in 2007 – will deliver both biological and non-biological information on Australia’s biodiversity online. The mapping system will display species distributions based on museum records with a range of other non-biological data. Because the system will allow the user to select and display a range of different information layers simultaneously, scientists will be able to examine patterns and relationships between data sets. The system will identify biodiversity “hot spots” and enable environmental and land planners to test a range of planning software tools through an online “conservation toolbox”. These software tools, when applied to the system’s maps, can be used to assess conservation priorities in Australia.

BioMaps will help quantify threats to biodiversity better and further our understanding of important biodiversity patterns across the country. Biomaps will enable investigation of biodiversity indicators and increase knowledge of human impacts. Because scientists will be able to identify areas about which little information exists, BioMaps will act as a guide to the biological survey effort in Australia.

BioMaps, the Pilbara regional case study in Western Australia

The Pilbara area of Western Australia is an important region of mining in Australia. The production value of the mines and agricultural land is well known but the biodiversity value is poorly understood. A biological survey of the area, using the framework of the national map, will address this gap and build understanding of the region’s biology. This information will give both Rio Tinto and other land managers and planners a better understanding of biodiversity issues when making decisions on land use.

BugWise, measuring biodiversity in New South Wales

Invertebrates, particularly insects, are a strong measure of ecosystem complexity and health. But measuring invertebrate biodiversity is difficult and costly, requiring a great deal of scientific expertise and resources – mainly because of the huge diversity and abundance of insects. BugWise is tackling this problem by developing new methods to enable non-scientists to measure and quantify insect biodiversity in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales. The new methods are being applied and tested with the aim of enabling local community groups and land managers to take part in meaningful ecological research.

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The Australian Museum is working with the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund on a project in the Pilbara and with Rio Tinto’s Coal & Allied Community Trust in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales.



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