OUTBACK Queensland has become the focus of an international research project that is helping to decipher the evolution of Australian dinosaurs and their relationships to those of other southern continents.

In a unique Australian-American project, researchers from The University of Queensland and Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, are hoping recent fossil finds may put dinosaurs from Down Under on the international map. Palaeontologists Dr Steve Salisbury, from UQ, and Dr Matt Lamanna, from Carnegie Museum of Natural History, have begun excavations of rich fossil beds near the central-western Queensland town of Winton that they believe may shed new light on the evolution of Southern Hemisphere dinosaurs.

“Like its modern fauna, Australia’s dinosaur assemblage has traditionally been thought of as very distinctive and unusual,” Dr Salisbury said. “Some Australian dinosaurs have been considered relics of groups that went extinct much earlier in other parts of the world, while others have been seen as early representatives of groups that are more typical of the Northern Hemisphere.

“These interpretations are not consistent with what we now know from the other southern continents. During the time that most of Australia’s dinosaurs existed, there is strong evidence for animals moving between many of the landmasses that once comprised the southern super continent of Gondwana.”

According to Drs Salisbury and Lamanna, there is now an expectation that some of the dinosaur groups known from places such as South America should also have representatives in Australia.

“The dense fossil deposits that we are beginning to explore near Winton should help us to test some of these ideas,” he said.

Dr Lamanna, who is the curator of one of the largest dinosaur collections in the world, said the quantity of dinosaur bones found so far near Winton was “spectacular”.

“This is a really exciting discovery,” Dr Lamanna said. “I have never worked at a site that has such a dense accumulation of bones. Australian dinosaurs are extremely poorly known compared to those of all other continents except Antarctica, so literally anything we discover has the potential to be very, very significant. I can’t wait to get back.”

For more on the project, visit www.uq.edu.au/dinosaurs.
TREASURES IN THE DIRT: Dr Steve Salisbury, left, and UQ student Stephen Faggotter carefully unearth dinosaur bones in Winton.

PHOTO: ANDREW DUNNE, UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND.