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Museum Boss Faces Ethics Charge

By [John Fleck](#)

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An argument over ancient Northern New Mexico fossils has led to charges that the acting director of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science violated scientific ethics.

A group of scientists charged in a complaint last year that Spencer Lucas snatched away naming rights to a newly discovered ancient alligator-like creature from a young graduate student at Northern Arizona who had made the key discoveries.

The complaint against Lucas, a paleontologist, was submitted to the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, which runs the Natural History Museum.

Lucas, in an interview Friday, denied the charges, and Stuart Ashman, state Secretary of Cultural Affairs, said a department inquiry concluded they were without merit.

But John Geissman, chairman of the University of New Mexico's Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, wrote to the complaining scientists last August that, based on the evidence they provided, their "suggestions of unethical behavior on the part of Dr. Lucas appear to be well-founded."

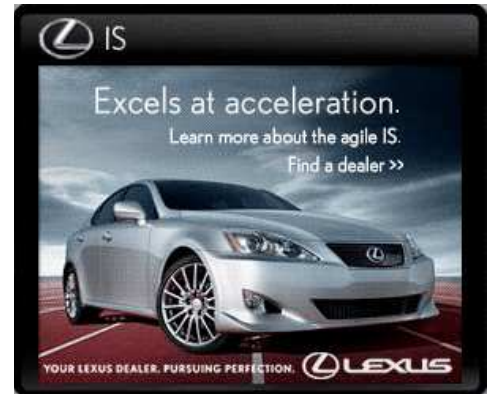
The allegations were first reported Thursday in the British scientific journal Nature.

Naming rights race

Naming a new creature is prestigious and can be important to the career of a young scientist.

The young scientist in this case is Bill Parker, who recently got his master's degree in paleontology at the University of Northern Arizona.

Parker argued in his 2003 master's degree thesis and again in a 2005 paper that the creature was



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sufficiently unique to warrant its own name. Lucas admits he reviewed the 2005 paper but says he doesn't recall specifics of his review.

Lucas won the naming rights race with a paper published in 2006 in the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science Bulletin, an in-house museum scientific publication.

He bestowed the name Rioarribasuchus on the creature, which was discovered more than five years earlier at a site near Ghost Ranch in Northern New Mexico.

Rioarribasuchus had originally been lumped with a group of similar creatures known by the name Desmatosuchus. But in their short, two-page paper, a team led by Lucas said the creature was sufficiently different that it deserved a new family name.

In addition to the paper Lucas reviewed, Parker advanced the case for a new name for the creature in another paper accepted in 2005 for publication in the Journal of Systematic Paleontology.

In that paper, Parker formally bestowed the name Heliocanthus on the creature.

That paper wasn't published until January 2007. By that time, Lucas had named the creature in the museum's in-house publication.

Under the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, the formal guidelines for naming living and dead organisms, the first person to publish the description of a new creature in the scientific literature gets to name it.

By beating Parker to the finish line, Lucas forever has his name attached to the creature and to all future scientific discussions of it.

Deliberate theft?

Parker and a group of colleagues supporting him allege that Lucas had reason to know Parker planned to publish a new name for the creature and used the quick publication avenue offered by the Museum's in-house bulletin to beat Parker to the punch.

Lucas's paper came out two weeks before Parker's, according to the scientists' complaint to the state.

Lucas denies that he knew Parker planned to name the new creature and says that he, Lucas, independently came to the conclusion that it deserved a new name.

Parker contends Lucas argued in 2005 that the creature should not be separated into a new category and given a new name.

While the debate might sound trivial to outsiders, being first is important to scientific careers, said

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Janet Stemwedel, a professor in science ethics at San Jose State University who has followed the case.

"There's this race to the finish line, to be first," Stemwedel said in a telephone interview Friday. "To find the same result a little bit later counts for nothing."

'Grey literature'

The incident is one of several cases in which Lucas's critics say the in-house Museum bulletin was used to short-circuit the time-consuming and rigorous process of peer review that accompanies more formal scientific journal publication.

Papers published in scientific journals are typically sent out to at least two independent experts in the field for review before being published in an effort to ensure their quality.

The Museum bulletins are in a separate category of scientific literature, sometimes referred to pejoratively as "grey literature," in which less rigorous publication standards apply.

Lucas said each paper published in the Museum bulletins is similarly required to undergo peer review by two scientists. The scientists who write the papers are required to find people to review them, Lucas said.

Martin Lockley, of the University of Colorado, supported Lucas's view. In a letter to the Department of Cultural Affairs on Thursday in response to the Nature article, he defended the Museum bulletins as high quality scientific publications.

In an online discussion of the issue, former museum staff member Kate Zeigler said papers written by museum staff scientists for inclusion in the museum bulletins "were generally handed to other in-house folks like myself to review or were sent to colleagues who were good friends and on the same scientific page as the authors.

"It does make one wonder how fair of a review could be given when papers were NEVER sent to folks who did not agree with the authors," Zeigler wrote.

Zeigler, a former student of Lucas' who has since left paleontology and is finishing her doctorate in geology at the University of New Mexico, confirmed Friday that the online comments were hers, but declined further comment.

Ashman said no formal report was prepared documenting the department's conclusion that the complaints by Parker and the other scientists were without merit.

But he said he was satisfied by the explanations offered by Lucas and his colleagues. "It didn't warrant that kind of formal inquiry," he said in explaining why no written report exists.

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