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Museum Ethics Spat May Get New Review

By John Fleck

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Faced with growing criticism nationally, the head of New Mexico's Department of Cultural Affairs on Thursday acknowledged the state's response to scientific ethics complaints against the head of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science has been insufficient.

Stuart Ashman said he is considering a new review into allegations against acting Museum Director Spencer Lucas in the face of a growing controversy that included:

- The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology— the professional organization for those who study fossils— said this week that its ethics committee is undertaking a formal investigation.
- A world-renowned paleontologist described the response as "stonewalling." Critics have accused Lucas of publishing their ideas under his own name in a scientific bulletin put out by the museum— which they say lacks the rigorous peer review of other publications and gives him an unfair advantage.

The complaint with the highest profile involves a dispute over who should have received credit for the naming of an alligator-like fossil found in northern New Mexico.

Lucas has denied he acted improperly, and Ashman previously said an investigation last year found the charges "without merit."

But amid growing criticism from some members of the scientific community, Ashman told the Journal on Thursday that he is considering asking for another review.

The charges involve allegations that New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science researchers, led by Lucas, used a museum publication to short-circuit the normal scientific peer review process.

The critics charge that Lucas and his colleagues used the museum publications, which have minimal outside review and can be published more quickly than conventional peer-reviewed scientific journals, to snatch away and claim credit for ideas originally developed by others.

Lucas could not be reached for comment Thursday, but, in an interview last week, he denied the allegations.

Credit for being first with ideas is important to scientific careers, according to Janet Stemwedel, who teaches scientific ethics at San Jose State University.

She called the facts of the case, as presented publicly in discussions among paleontologists, "appalling," and said in a telephone interview that the alleged behavior of Lucas and his colleagues threatens the cooperative sense of community necessary for science to succeed.

Kevin Padian, a world-renowned paleontologist at the University of California, Berkeley, said New Mexico state officials owe the scientists involved a more thorough explanation than a two-word statement that the charges are "without merit."

"This is not good for our field. It's not good for the museum," Padian said in

a telephone interview.

Padian was careful to note that he does not know whether Lucas's critics are correct. Padian and Lucas attended graduate school together and have known each other for 30 years, he noted. But he said that, in fairness to all the scientists involved, the issue deserves a more public airing.

"I must admit there are some things I don't understand about this affair, and it makes the present stonewalling inexplicable to me, as it is worrisome to many graduate students and younger workers," Padian wrote in an online posting outlining his views.

Ashman, in a telephone interview Thursday, said he was sympathetic to Padian's concerns. "I agree that saying 'no merit' is not enough of an answer," he said.

Ashman originally investigated the issue in June and concluded that the charges had no basis.

When Lucas' critics persisted, Ashman raised the issue again with the museum board's executive committee in September. They also reviewed the complaints and concluded they were without merit, according to executive committee member Peter Gerity.

But Gerity and Ashman say there is no written record documenting the investigation and conclusion.

"There isn't," Ashman said Thursday. "There should be."

Padian called the lack of any sort of formal accounting of the state's inquiries into the charges "puzzling."

"It's not the sort of thing that you expect from a public institution," he said.

Ashman said he is considering asking the museum board's executive committee to convene again to look into the case and create a more formal record of its review.

Padian offered praise for the Museum of Natural History. "It's got a very strong program of research and public education," he said.

That is why, he said, a more open inquiry is so important.

"There's a cloud out there now," Padian said. "The cloud is over the museum."

In addition to Ashman's comments, the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology's executive committee issued a statement saying the organization is investigating. The statement said the organization would not release any information or discuss the case publicly until the review is completed.

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