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Dig for Truth About Museum Fossil Claim

By

With the good name of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science under a cloud, a formal review of complaints against acting Director Spencer Lucas is urgently needed.

The New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs conducted a review last year of a dispute over rights to naming an alligator-like fossil, and found the complaints "without merit." The findings aren't documented and even Cultural Affairs boss Stuart Ashman now concedes that's not good enough.

Instead of going away, the controversy has only intensified and gained national prominence. It's time to resolve it.

The bone of contention is the naming of a fossil unearthed more than five years ago near Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico. It originally was thought to belong to a group of similar creatures, but a young graduate student at the University of Northern Arizona argued in his 2003 master's degree thesis and again in a 2005 paper that the creature was unique, and warranted its own name.

The student, Bill Parker, advanced that case in a paper accepted in 2005 for publication in the Journal of Systemic Paleontology. But while the paper was going through peer review, critics of Lucas say, Lucas and his museum colleagues snatched away naming rights to the creature.

Presenting their findings in the museum's Bulletin, an in-house scientific publication with less rigorous peer review than an outside journal, Lucas and his team named the creature Rioarribasuchus, effectively claiming it as their own.

The Bulletin article appeared just two weeks before Parker's, but Lucas has denied any attempt to beat



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the young man to naming rights.

It will be up to paleontologists to determine the merits of each side's research, but the Department of Cultural Affairs, which oversees the museum, must not delay in rectifying its own inquiry into the complaints. No written records were kept to document that inquiry, conducted by the museum board's executive committee.

Ashman, head of Cultural Affairs, says he may ask the committee to reconvene to look further into the complaints and create a formal record. That would at least be a start toward a full, third-party review.

"There's a cloud ... over the museum," said world-renowned paleontologist Kevin Padian, who described the state's handling of the case so far as "stonewalling."

A more appropriate behavior, especially for a group of professional fossil-hunters, would be digging for the truth.

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