

Saturday, February 23, 2008

## Ethics Panelist Calls Museum Flap Baseless

**By John Fleck**

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Scientific ethics charges against a state government researcher are baseless, according to a Colorado scientist brought in to help arbitrate the case.

But the review of charges against Spencer Lucas, acting director of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, appeared unlikely to quell the furor over the issue:

- Norman Silberling and Orin Anderson, brought in to provide an independent voice to the inquiry, both have close ties to Lucas.
- Silberling wrote a letter to state officials Monday declaring Lucas' innocence, three days before the review panel's meeting.
- The panel gave Lucas and another of the accused scientists a chance to defend themselves but never contacted the scientists who made the complaints.

The question of Anderson and Silberling's independence drew sharp criticism after their names were made public Thursday.

Last year, Lucas dedicated a book to Silberling, describing him in the book's foreword as "a fine gentlemen and a gentle soul."

"This needs to be done by a neutral third party," said Bill Parker, one of the scientists who filed a complaint against Lucas. "I don't feel they've done that."

Parker, a former graduate student at Northern Arizona University, and Jeffrey Martz of Texas Tech, complained after their work allegedly showed up, without attribution, in scientific papers published by Lucas and his colleagues.

Participants have dubbed the affair, which has drawn international attention, "Aetogate". The debate is about the study of ancient creatures known as "aetosaurus."

Lucas has denied the charges. He declined comment Friday, citing the ongoing state review.

State officials asked Silberling and New Mexico geologist Orin Anderson to help with an independent review of the charges.

State Cultural Affairs chief Stuart Ashman called for the review after outside scientists blasted the state for not taking the charges seriously.

In response, Ashman called for a new review and invited two "outside guest experts" to aid in the new inquiry.

"Including individuals not at all connected to the museum and its administration (as board members are) would provide a more objective perspective in the review," Cultural Affairs spokesman Doug Svetnica said in a statement.

The choices were greeted with derision by some scientists because of long-standing academic partnerships between the investigators and the accused.

A scholarly library index lists Anderson and Lucas as coauthors of 65 research papers. Silberling and Lucas coauthored five papers.

Lucas has dedicated books to both Silberling and Anderson, and, in his Feb. 18 letter, Silberling described himself as "a professional friend and admirer of Lucas."

Anderson and Silberling met Thursday with members of the executive committee of the museum's board to review the allegations. A report is expected by March 3.

The panel heard from Lucas and Adrian Hunt, former director of the museum and a co-author on both of the papers in question. Hunt could not be reached Friday. The panel did not hear from Parker or Martz, the two primary accusers.

Even before Thursday's review meeting, Silberling said he believed there was no substance to the charges. He said in the Feb. 18 letter that he based that conclusion on reading material submitted by the accusers, as well as detailed responses by Lucas.

Silberling, in a telephone interview Friday from his Colorado home, dismissed questions about his ability to be impartial.

"This was in no way a jury trial, so there's no way friends of Spencer and people who have been with him shouldn't comment," Silberling said.

In his letter, Silberling characterized Lucas' accusers as a group of "mainly young, un- or under-employed workers (including both Park and Martz)" that has "for whatever reasons a strong grudge against Lucas and the (museum)."

Parker denied bearing a grudge, saying he had worked with Lucas and other Museum of Natural History colleagues until late 2006, when the disputed paper came out.

"I don't even know Silberling," Parker said in a telephone interview Friday. "I've never even met him, so I don't know how he could say a thing like that."

Parker said neither Silberling nor anyone else involved in this week's investigation had contacted him. Martz could not be reached for comment Friday.

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