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Old Bones of Contention

By

State officials overseeing the Museum of Natural History and Science promised "a more objective perspective" on a scientific controversy by bringing in two outside scientists.

The dispute is about research identifying as a separate species an ancient creature whose fossilized bones are in the museum's collection. Spencer Lucas, the museum's acting director, initially lumped the crocodile-like lizard with a known species. Another researcher endeavored to prove otherwise and publish a paper that would clinch coveted naming rights. Lucas, meanwhile, changed his mind and beat his rival by two weeks to the publication punch.

But where the other researcher ran the gantlet of peer review and acceptance by a journal, Lucas' paper was reviewed by collaborators and employees and printed in the newsletter of the museum he runs.

That seems about as far south of scientific rigor as the choice of these particular outside scientists falls short of due diligence. Both have collaborated with Lucas on research; both are named in dedications of Lucas books. The objective perspective of one of the quasi-judges was called into doubt by his declaring a not-guilty verdict several days before reviewers convened their closed-door hearing.

Cultural Affairs should remand this dispute to the jurisdiction of a scientific academy that at least has some notion of what objectivity is.

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