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Review Panel Clears N.M. Museum Director

By John Fleck

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A prominent state government scientist did not steal the ideas of a pair of graduate students, a review panel has concluded.

The panel, convened by the leadership of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, concluded that acting museum Director Spencer Lucas was not guilty of accusations made last year by a pair of young scientists.

Stuart Ashman, head of the Department of Cultural Affairs, called for the review after critics accused his agency of "stonewalling" the case.

Ashman, who had already concluded the charges were "without merit," said the scientists who made the allegations deserved a more thorough airing of their concerns.

It is unclear what might have happened if the panel had ruled in favor of Lucas' critics.

The review drew quick rebukes from outside critics who questioned the impartiality of the scientists brought in to help review the case.

The critics also noted that the review panel allowed Lucas and his colleagues to speak in their defense but never heard from the scientists who made the accusations.

A group of scientists alleged Lucas had published ideas developed by two paleontology graduate students without giving them credit.

Lucas said he and his museum colleagues came to the ideas independently. The review panel said it believed Lucas' version of events.

The review appears unlikely to settle an international furor, which dates to April 2007, when British paleontologist Darren Naish first wrote about the problems on his blog.

Critics on Tuesday claim the process was stacked in Lucas' favor, because two scientists brought in to help the museum leadership review the issues—Orin Anderson and Norman Silberling—acknowledged longstanding ties to Lucas. Both had published papers with Lucas, and Lucas had dedicated books to each of them.

"I don't think there's any question that the process is marred by what is at the very least the strong appearance of conflict of interest," said Janet Stewedel, a philosophy professor at California's San Jose State University who has been following the case.

Doug Svetnica, spokesman for the state Department of Cultural Affairs, which runs the museum, defended the choice of scientists, who were selected "because of their academic and publishing backgrounds."

"Any prior professional experience with Dr. Lucas was irrelevant," Svetnica said Tuesday. "As professionals, we expected and we feel that we received impartial reviews and conclusions."

The review panel also included three members of the Museum of Natural History's board of trustees.

Svetnica said the report would be forwarded to the Society for Vertebrate Paleontology, which is also reviewing the complaints against Lucas, and the New Mexico Academy of Science, which called for an independent

investigation.

Name controversy

The most prominent case involves the name given to a newly identified type of prehistoric crocodilelike creature found by Museum of Natural History scientists more than six years ago in northern New Mexico.

Museum scientists originally published a paper in 2003 misidentifying it, and Northern Arizona University graduate student Bill Parker pointed out their mistake in his 2003 thesis.

Museum scientists at first disagreed, so Parker wrote a paper of his own pointing out that the creature was new and giving it a name— a major coup for a young scientist.

But before Parker's paper could come out, Lucas changed his mind and wrote a paper of his own, which was published in the Museum of Natural History's in-house scientific bulletin.

Because Lucas' paper came out first, the naming rights went to him.

Lucas, in interviews and a written submission to the review panel, said he was not aware Parker was planning to name the creature, and did not intentionally try to scoop him.

In addition, according to Lucas, Parker should have asked for permission before publishing a paper on the museum's fossils. "We never thought he would publish ... without first contacting us," Lucas said.

Parker disputed that account Tuesday. During a 2003 visit to the museum, Lucas told Parker he could write a paper naming the creature if he wanted, according to Parker. Parker claims that Lucas even jokingly suggested a possible name: "Andysuchus," after Andy Heckert, a colleague of Lucas' who was on the museum's staff at the time.

Lucas' critics point out that when the tables were turned, Lucas behaved differently. In another case that has drawn international attention, Jerzy Dzik of the Institute of Paleobiology of the Polish Academy of Science complained that Lucas visited his museum to look at fossils, then published a paper about them without asking permission.

In that case, Lucas blamed the Polish researchers for not telling him he could not write about the fossils they showed him.

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