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Thorough Airing Ends Up a Waste of Oxygen

By

The scientists who allege their ideas were poached by the acting director of New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science deserve a thorough airing of the charges. That's what Stuart Ashman, the cabinet secretary overseeing the museum, said when he called for a review of his decision that the charges were without merit. But it is hard to be confident that a thoroughly objective airing is what they got.

Selection of the panel that echoed Cultural Affairs Secretary Ashman's decision might be seen as predetermining the conclusion. Three of its members are on the museum's board. Two members selected to bring an outside perspective to the review have collaborated with the museum's acting director, Spencer Lucas, on research and have been mentioned by him in the dedications of his books. One of them declared Lucas' innocence before the panel convened.

When it did convene, the panel heard from Lucas, but not from the scientists who assert Lucas snatched their ideas about a fossil representing a species previously unknown, then beat them to the publication punch by taking the shortcut of the newsletter produced by his own museum.

Lucas is poorly served by a process so one-sided that it does nothing to clear the cloud above the solid reputation he has achieved.

Apparently more familiar with juried art shows than with juries selected for objectivity, Ashman fell short of the goal of a thorough airing of the matter. That task now falls to a more appropriate forum, the ethics panel of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology.

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