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Scientists: Museum Ethics Inquiry 'Travesty'

By John Fleck

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A state inquiry into science ethics allegations at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science was one-sided and, therefore, inadequate, a group of scientists said in a formal response sent to state officials.

"This travesty of an inquiry was deficient in so many respects as to render its findings entirely worthless," the scientists wrote in a letter sent to the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs last week.

The letter came from four scientists, including two who filed formal protests last year over what they said was theft of their ideas by scientists at the museum led by paleontologist Spencer Lucas. Lucas is the museum's current acting director.

The Department of Cultural affairs and the state-owned museum's leadership held a formal inquiry into the issue Feb. 21. But while they allowed Lucas and others to appear in person to rebut the allegations, the inquiry did not include any testimony from the scientists who made the allegations.

"In fact," they wrote in their letter to the head of the Department of Cultural Affairs and Gov. Bill Richardson, "we were not even informed that the inquiry would be taking place until we read about it in a newspaper on the very day it was conducted."

Bill Parker and Jeffrey Martz, both graduate students, contend that a group of scientists led by Lucas stole their ideas, publishing them without credit in the in-house scientific bulletin published by the Museum of Natural History.

Located in Albuquerque, the museum is a state-owned research and education center. Its scientists excavate and study ancient fossils found in New Mexico.

Parker's complaint, the most prominent, alleges that Lucas and his colleagues snatched away the naming rights to an entirely new type of ancient alligatorlike creature found by museum scientists in northern New Mexico.

Parker claims that the idea— that it was a new kind of creature— was originally his, and that Lucas and his colleagues disagreed. But then, at the last minute, according to Parker, Lucas rushed a publication into print scooping Parker's effort to name the creature.

In a lengthy written defense provided to state officials, Lucas argued that he independently came to the same idea, a claim state officials accepted when they released a report exonerating Lucas.

But in the formal reply to the state, Parker argued that he was never given a chance to present facts that he said would have rebutted Lucas's claim.

Troy Fernandez, deputy secretary of the Department of Cultural Affairs, said Friday the agency believed the original written complaints provided by Parker and Martz, which were "quite voluminous," were sufficient to get their side of the story for the purposes of the inquiry.

The scientists and state officials are awaiting the outcome of a separate investigation being conducted by the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology, a scientific organization.

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