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Museum Ethics Case Closes With Mixed Ruling

By John Fleck

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An independent scientific body offered a mixed ruling Friday on scientific ethics charges against researchers at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, acknowledging some problems but concluding that there is not enough evidence to resolve the most serious allegation.

The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology committee aimed its sharpest criticism at the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, saying the department failed to conduct a proper investigation into the allegations against the state-paid scientists.

A group of researchers last year charged that scientists at the Museum of Natural History pilfered their ideas on several occasions, using the museum's in-house publications to claim credit for the work.

The charges have caused a furor in international scientific circles, with some arguing that they have tarnished the reputation of the museum.

Acting museum director Spencer Lucas, the leader of the group of scientists charged with the ethical lapses, did not respond to a request for comment Friday.

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Also this week, University of New Mexico officials acknowledged that Lucas' unpaid faculty affiliation with the university was not being renewed.

The allegations came from Northern Arizona University graduate student William Parker and Texas Tech graduate student Jeffrey Martz. The two charged that, in separate cases, Lucas and his colleagues used the Museum's in-house scientific bulletin to steal their ideas.

In Parker's case, the Society review found that the allegation boiled down to Parker's word against Lucas'.

The Society found that the Museum scientists' failure to give credit to Martz was "an oversight" rather than plagiarism.

The Society saved its harshest criticism for the Department of Cultural Affairs, which oversees the museum. The Department conducted its own investigation but brought in scientists who had worked closely with Lucas to do it.

The Department's review exonerated Lucas, but the connections between Lucas and the scientists brought in to investigate him appeared "less than objective and did little to resolve the issues in a satisfactory way," the Society report concluded.

Secretary of Cultural Affairs Stuart Ashman defended the impartiality of the department's review. "However," he wrote in a letter to the Society, "I can see that ... there was a perception of conflict of interest. Lesson learned."

In a telephone interview, Ashman said there will be no additional review of the case as a result.

The Society also criticized the Museum's scientific publication practices.

Museum of Natural History scientists were allowed to pick who reviewed their papers, including the ones at the heart of the allegations by Martz and Parker. Reviews were often done in-house by other Museum scientists rather than being sent to independent researchers. Such cozy practices "left the authors vulnerable to the appearance of impropriety," the Society review concluded.

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