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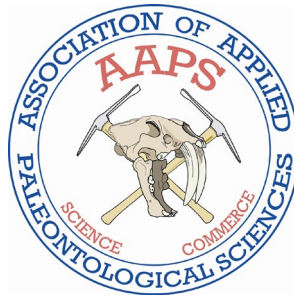
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October 30, 2020

Press Release

Subject: AAPS Response to Negative Comments Regarding the Sale of Tyrannosaurs “Stan”

Every time we see headlines about a dinosaur being sold at auction for millions of dollars, we see articles written about the damage done to science (1, 2, 3). The latest articles are on the sale of a T-Rex named “Stan”. These articles talk about how the sale results in the specimen being locked up away from the eyes of the scientific establishment. The fossil can never be studied properly. It won’t be properly cared for. It will disappear, never to be seen again. The high price fetched at auction makes it harder for public institutions to buy some of these fossils.

While academic paleontologists decry the sale of fossils because of all of these reasons, they never mention the whole true picture. The fact is that these specimens would never be found and brought to light if it were not because of the financial incentive. It costs a lot of money to find, excavate, mount, and sell a dinosaur. Many of the fossils seen on display at museums were sourced from commercial collectors. Commercial collectors frequently donate or sell at reduced prices to museums. Museums do not have the funds that it takes to do what commercial collectors do at their own risk. Most never make one of the big splashy finds despite working hard at it for many years. Academics have free access to public lands which cover much of the fossil bearing lands in this country. There are so many fossils out there that they can’t dig them up fast enough to stop them from eroding away into dust. Commercial collectors are not allowed on these lands. Why attack private individuals making money from private land? It might be smarter to change laws to allow partnership between private enterprise and academics on public lands which would bring allow for the discovery of more fossils and increase knowledge. Private individuals and corporations use public lands for mining, oil, grazing and forestry, why not for fossils? Commercial collectors could search for fossils on public lands and fossils could be shared between public institutions and the collector.

Other countries have no such rule and much knowledge has been gained from working with commercial collectors instead of working against them. Indeed German, Canadian, and Australian scientists and collectors almost laugh at American attacks on commercial fossil collection. There are many instances of partnerships between academics and commercial entities where the commercial company collects the fossils and shares the specimens with a museum. Both sides benefit. The museum gets specimens to add to their collection and study and the commercial entity gets access to a fossil site that it would otherwise not be allowed to collect. It is a shame that here in America such common-sense partnerships are not even considered due to closed minded thinking.

Many ranchers are in dire financial condition and the sale of fossils provides much needed income that helps ranches that may have been in the family for generations from having to be sold at bankruptcy auctions. The occasional splashy auction sale does not show the hundreds of commercial collectors that invest many hours and dollars searching for fossils to no avail and return on investment. Commercial collecting is free enterprise

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in action, private investors putting up their own money and hard work hoping to make a valuable find. The criticism that comes from some academics whose research is supported by teaching or working at a publicly funded institution is being leveled at people who are just trying to make a living by selling fossils instead of studying them.

Museums have hundreds and maybe thousands of fossils stored that still have not been even looked at. Some museums have fossils stored for over fifty years! It is a fact that some of these specimens have been stored improperly and thus damaged and lost to science. Museums have occasionally lost specimens due to poor record keeping, damage, fire or even being bombed during war. So, museums are not always the safe place these articles make them out to be. Museums can also be closed due to financial failure.

The undisputable fact is that fossils are constantly being exposed by erosion. Once a fossil is exposed at or near the surface it starts to degrade and fall apart. Many hillsides are littered with chunks of bone left to natural forces for too long. One can return to a site year after year and watch this destruction over time. Given enough time, the bones turn to crumbs, forever lost. Many collectors can tell you stories of watching this happen on public lands where collection of fossils is prohibited. How much sense does it make to let this happen? Why don't the authors of these articles ever mention this? People tell stories of finding fossils on public lands and being told after reporting the find that the government does not want the fossil but that the finder can't collect it and so it stays there to erode into dust. They will tell you they are saving the fossils for our children's children. A noble but untrue and wasteful concept.

Many academics have nurtured relationships with commercial collectors that have benefitted both sides. Many others absolutely refuse to have anything to do with commercial collectors. The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology has put rules in place that prohibit a scientist from publishing research on a specimen not held by a museum. The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology states that a fossil must be available for future study and this can only be guaranteed by placement in a museum. According to SVP, research should not be done on a fossil that is not in a museum. Hypocritical instances of this concept are easily found. How much knowledge has been lost to science from such a closed-minded idea? While it might not be the ideal to have limited access to a specimen, certainly any knowledge gained is better than none. An article here: <https://paleorxiv.org/xmkhb/> presents a detailed and well-reasoned argument.

Members of The Association of Applied Paleontological Sciences (AAPS), <https://aaps.net/>, a trade organization of commercial fossil dealers, collectors and preparators has often tried to work with academics but to no avail. They offer scholarships to paleontology students which in some cases have been refused due to the applicant being afraid of consequences of being tied to commercial collecting. There is also often a lack of applicants. What could be the harm in helping fund a student research project?

Perhaps the day will come when cooperation rules the day, when commercial collectors and academics work together to further the science of paleontology and when we can celebrate, instead of attack, the achievement of a private enterprise bringing a true wonder of the world to light.