

Society of Vertebrate Paleontology

Statement from the Executive Committee about the allegations of unethical conduct from J. Martz, W. Parker, M. Taylor and M. Wedel against S. Lucas, A. Hunt, A. Heckert, and J. Spielmann

The SVP Executive Committee has reviewed the report from the Ethics Education Committee regarding allegations brought by Jeffrey Martz (and colleagues) and separately by William Parker concerning improper and unethical conduct in publishing and attributing credit on the part of Spencer G. Lucas, Adrian P. Hunt, Andrew B. Heckert, and Justin P. Spielmann (henceforth, Lucas et al.).

The Ethics Education Committee followed its stated protocol for evaluating the charge of an ethics violation. The accused party was notified of the allegations and was given an opportunity to reply in detail. Both the accusers and the accused were given the opportunity for a second round of responses. All of these communications were treated as confidential, and this committee will release none of the reports for public view. We note that none of the members of the Ethics Education Committee has any conflicts of interest regarding these cases (none of the committee members has collaborated with, coauthored with, advised, or been a student of either the accusers or the accused individuals). The Executive Committee is confident that the review by the Ethics Education Committee has taken the allegations and responses seriously and has presented an unbiased judgment. Below we summarize the conclusions from the review.

Allegations of Martz et al.

Jeffrey W. Martz, Michael P. Taylor, and Matthew J. Wedel accused Lucas et al. of committing plagiarism in the 2006 publication by Spielmann et al. in the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science Bulletin (reference listed below). Martz et al. claimed that Spielmann et al. took credit for re-interpretation of an aetosaur osteoderm without crediting the Masters thesis of Jeffrey Martz (2002) for the same insight. While it was an oversight of Spielmann et al. not to indicate by citation that J. Martz had previously reached a similar conclusion concerning the orientation of the scute, the Ethics Education Committee concluded that this omission did not rise to the level of plagiarism, in which there is clear intent to take someone else's work and pass it off as one's own. Spielmann et al. (2006) cited Martz (2002) extensively (14 times) in the 2006 paper. Indeed, Martz's thesis is one of the two most heavily cited references. The authors of Spielmann et al. (2006) acknowledged that it was an "oversight" on their part not to cite Martz (2002) in the discussion of the re-interpretation of the orientation of the osteoderm, and stated that they had no intention of plagiarizing his ideas.

Allegations of Parker

William Parker accused Spencer G. Lucas, Adrian P. Hunt, and Justin P. Spielmann of deliberately rushing to publish a new genus name (*Rioarribasuchus*) for the aetosaur *Desmatosuchus chamaensis*, despite these authors knowing that Parker had been working on the

same material for several years, and that he intended to reassign the material to a new genus in a forthcoming publication. The two-page paper naming this genus by Lucas, Hunt and Spielmann appeared in the December 2006 issue of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science Bulletin and was followed by Parker's publication in the Journal of Systematic Palaeontology (January, 2007) that erected the genus name *Heliocanthus* for the species, as part of a larger review of aetosaur phylogeny.

Faced with conflicting testimonies, the Ethics Education Committee was not able to resolve these allegations in favor of either side, a position that does not absolve either party of responsibility. For example, Parker claimed that he had permission from staff members of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science to study the aetosaur material and publish on the fossils, but Lucas et al. assert that only Lucas can grant such permission, and that he did not. Parker claimed that Lucas said in a conversation at the museum (corroborated by a witness) that he (Parker) should name the new genus. However, neither Lucas nor his provided witness claim to have any recollection of this conversation. Parker noted that he expressed his intention to publish on the new genus in a number of venues (abstracts, talks, other papers), but Lucas et al. state that they were unaware of his intentions to publish a new name, noting that they knew only that Parker considered the genus assignment incorrect. They do cite Parker and Irmis (2005) in their 2006 paper as justification for the assignment of *D. chamaensis* to a new genus, but maintain that they came to their own determination, independent of the work by Parker and his colleagues.

Lessons learned

The report concludes with suggestions about how these conflicts might have been avoided. We reiterate those suggestions here and offer several additional perspectives.

First, science is both an individual and a social process. Achievement involves not only individual and collaborative discoveries and publications but also support of other workers, especially junior scientists, in one's scientific community. Overly competitive behavior does not necessarily further our discipline.

Second, while neither the allegations of Martz et al. nor those of Parker are explicitly covered under the SVP Ethics Bylaw, the allegations do concern matters of professional conduct and propriety. Matters such as plagiarism and theft lie partly in the domain of SVP as a scientific society, but they are more directly the responsibility of employers and journal editors as well as individuals. We expect reviews of professional conduct to be unbiased and free of conflicts of interest (real or apparent), regardless of whether they are performed by professional societies, employers or editors. The review by the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science of the complaints leveled by Martz and Parker was conducted in part by scientists who had prior association with the accused, which made the conclusions of that review appear less than objective and did little to resolve the issues in a satisfactory way.

Third, specialists working separately on the same fossil material can indeed independently reach the same conclusion about morphology, taxonomy, or other aspects of the fossils. Indeed the foundations of our science are based on the premise that repeatable conclusions can be reached

objectively by independent study of the same material. Intellectual theft, therefore, can be difficult to prove without specific documentation that goes beyond, for example, similarities in anatomical description.

Fourth, the editorial practices of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science Bulletin have left the authors vulnerable to the appearance of impropriety. Authors, including volume editors, have commissioned reviews of their own manuscripts; manuscripts have been reviewed in-house by other Museum personnel; and journal editors have made decisions about whether to accept their own papers for publication. These procedures do little to protect authors from charges of inappropriate conduct, should such charges be made in error.

Fifth, lack of communication can exacerbate conflicts such as these two. For example, if Parker had notified Lucas and colleagues in 2006 of his accepted manuscript naming the new genus and sent them a copy of the manuscript, then it would have been clearly unethical for Lucas et al. to move forward with their own publication. Similarly, when Lucas et al. first became aware that Parker intended to publish upon the fossils that Lucas and colleagues were (to their minds, exclusively) studying, it would have been prudent for Lucas or his colleagues to contact Parker about the apparent conflict.

Sixth, the expectation that theses and dissertations that have not been republished in widely read periodicals will be read by most workers or manuscript reviewers is unlikely to be realized. If students publish material in theses or dissertations that they intend to republish in other venues, they should be wary about circulating their work until publication is well under way, if they are concerned that their work is topical enough that other workers might want to draw immediately from their findings. Conversely, those who are aware of the results of an unpublished thesis should allow the thesis writer a reasonable time to publish his or her results first, even if similar results are obtained independently.

Finally, the public posting of opinion and correspondence about these allegations on the Internet has not been helpful to resolving these matters, both in regard to the SVP Ethics Education Committee fairly resolving the matters, but also in that it has potentially polarized and biased the vertebrate paleontology community in a way that jeopardizes fair consideration of these matters as a community.

To reduce the likelihood of similar situations arising in the future, the Ethics Education Committee has drafted a set of “best practices” in publishing and museum research. This document will provide SVP members and their organizations with a professional and ethical foundation from which to build stronger research relationships. In addition, the Ethics Education Committee and Executive Committee are in the process of evaluating whether to amend and expand the Bylaw on Ethics, so that any future such complaints – if found to have merit – can be acted upon more forcefully.

Literature cited

- Lucas, Hunt and Spielmann. 2006. *Rioarribasuchus*, a new name for an aetosaur from the Upper Triassic of north-central New Mexico. New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, Bulletin 37, 581-582.
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