

GUIDELINES FROM THE ETHICS EDUCATION COMMITTEE FOR COLLECTING, DOCUMENTING AND CURATING FOSSILS

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The SVP Bylaws (Bylaw 12, Sections 1-6) state clearly the responsibility of vertebrate paleontologists, and specifically SVP members, to uphold professional standards in the collection, documentation and curation of vertebrate fossils and to adhere to regulations and property rights governing their collection and curation.

Professional standards in collection of fossils include obtaining the proper permits and permissions to conduct fieldwork on public or private lands, whether domestic or foreign. The collection of fossils from field localities includes not only retrieving fossils with care but also documenting their provenance in terms of stratigraphic, geographic, taphonomic and paleoenvironmental information. This approach is important for both professional and amateur paleontologists to follow in collecting scientifically significant fossils, even if the fossils legally remain in private collections for some time. The scientific and educational value of the fossils depends on their contextual information as well as their morphology.

Field data, whether in the form of notebooks, electronic files or any other format, should accompany the fossils collected from public lands (and from private lands if so stipulated) to their deposition in a qualified, publicly accessible repository. This means that original field data (or a legible copy of it) must become part of the deposited fossil collection. Fossils and their contextual data must be accessioned and curated in an institution, the mission of which is scientific study and education in perpetuity. Fossils should be accessioned in a timely manner.

Complying with regulations that protect vertebrate fossils, determining the ownership of land on which field exploration and collection takes place, and obtaining necessary permits and permission is the responsibility of the vertebrate paleontologist. Regulations vary and change over time, as does property ownership; both should be reconfirmed before collecting.

Curation entails the proper housing and labeling of fossils, as well as maintaining the association between the fossils and field data about their provenance. This information must be made available to the scientific community and the interested public within a reasonable period of time. Access by researchers to collections is regarded as an essential quality for all registered public collections.

While most vertebrate fossils are scientifically relevant because they help document geographic and stratigraphic ranges and their morphology helps document variability, a scientifically significant is one that has been used to generate significant new scientific knowledge through peer-reviewed publication or has the potential to generate significant new knowledge if correctly prepared and studied.

If vertebrate fossils are to be deaccessioned from registered collections procedures should follow the recommended guidelines as outlined by either the American Association of Museums (AAM) and be in accord with in the International Council of Museums (ICOM) code of ethics.