



## Society of Vertebrate Paleontology

9650 Rockville Pike • Bethesda, MD 20814-3998

Phone: (301) 634-7814 • Fax: (301) 634-7455

Email: [svp@vertpaleo.org](mailto:svp@vertpaleo.org) • Web:

[www.vertpaleo.org](http://www.vertpaleo.org)

FEIN: 06-0906643

June 11, 2020

David M. Zaslav, President and CEO, Discovery  
Bruce Campbell, Chief Development, Distribution & Legal Officer, Discovery  
Robert J. Miron, Chairman, Discovery  
Kyle Wheeler, Executive Producer, Discovery  
Gretchen Morning, Executive Producer, Discovery  
Jessica Driscoll, VP of Communications, Discovery  
Ethan Galvin, Producer, Discovery  
Sean Gallagher, Executive Producer, Half Yard Productions  
Nicole Sorrenti, Executive Producer, Half Yard Productions  
John Jones, Executive Producer, Half Yard Productions

Dear President Zaslav,

We are writing to you about your upcoming series, “The Dino Hunter”, premiering June 19, 2020. The press packet for this series highlights two troubling issues for us as a scientific society dedicated to advancing the science of vertebrate paleontology.

The first is the tone-deaf promotion of the idea that paleontology is the sole prerogative of white men (there’s a whole project, the Bearded Lady Project, <http://thebeardedladyproject.com>, about this lack of visibility of women researchers in paleontology). There are an ever-increasing number of women and BIPOC scientists, who are adding immensely to our understanding of life on Earth, and yet if you watch Discovery you would assume, as many children do, that women, Black, indigenous and other people of colour can’t be paleontologists. This is damaging to those researchers and to the health of our field; geosciences is one of the least diverse branches of science [see attached article, Dutt, “Race and racism in the geosciences”, Nature]. Geoscience societies have a real and urgent duty to rectify this problem and many, including our own, are taking measures to do so. This is even more pressing in light of the recent events across the world that starkly demonstrate the bias that Black people face in their everyday lives, and which your network is trying to address with a special featuring Oprah Winfrey. As scientists, as the popular media, we have a moral imperative to address this systematic bias. For future efforts, the leadership of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology is ready and willing to help connect you with paleontologists who do high-quality science within the public sphere for the benefit of all, and who better represent the variety of people within the field.

The second issue is that this series highlights and glamourizes the sale of vertebrate fossils to the highest bidder. We are appalled that your network is promoting the sale of fossils in such a

manner. Vertebrate fossils are <sup>1</sup>unique and rare, and represent our best record of life's past. It is a fact that some of our members purchase fossils in order to bring them into the public trust. However when fossils are sold privately, they are lost from the public trust. The bidding power of private individuals often outstrips the resources of institutions committed to keep fossils for the public trust, hence these specimens are lost to science and the general public, the latter being the very people you are trying to reach with this documentary series! This is critically important to us because it hinders our understanding of these animals and environments they inhabited. Furthermore, scientific practice demands that conclusions drawn from the fossils should be verifiable: scientists must be able to reexamine, re-measure, and reinterpret them (such reexamination can happen decades or even centuries after the fact). Technological advances, new scientific questions, and opportunities for synthetic research mean that new research often utilizes fossils that were originally collected with other purposes in mind. For these reasons, our Society's bylaws explicitly state that "The barter, sale, or purchase of scientifically significant vertebrate fossils is not condoned, unless it brings them into, or keeps them within, a public trust." Promoting the sale of fossils without regard to the buyer, and without regard for careful collection and recording of contextual data, undermines the scientific process for studying past life as well as the prospect for future generations to share the natural heritage of our planet.

We call on you to consider these issues, and whether this series is really consistent with your mission statement in your Code, "WE DO THE RIGHT THING: We act and make decisions with integrity. We are honest, open, genuine and transparent in our work. We act with courage and challenge the status quo."

Sincerely yours,



Emily J. Rayfield, Ph.D.  
*SVP President*



Jessica M. Theodor, Ph. D.  
*SVP Vice President*



P. David Polly, Ph.D.  
*Past SVP President*

---

<sup>1</sup> The original letter has been revised to reflect the fact that the promotional material SVP received was incorrect and misleading about Mr. Murphy's role in the production. SVP apologizes to Mr. Murphy.

**About the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology:** The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology was founded in 1940 to advance the science of vertebrate paleontology and today has more than 2,200 members representing professionals, students, artists, preparators, and others interested in vertebrate paleontology. The Society is organized exclusively for educational and scientific purposes, with a mission to serve the common interests and facilitate the cooperation of those concerned with the study of vertebrate animals, including the geological beds in which they are found. The Society is also concerned with the conservation and preservation of fossil sites.

**SVP Bylaw on Member Ethics**

<http://vertpaleo.org/Membership/Member-Ethics/Member-Bylaw-on-Ethics-Statement.aspx>

**SVP letter to the Aguttes auction house about the sale of fossil vertebrates (2018):**

<http://vertpaleo.org/GlobalPDFS/SVP-to-Aguttes-about-Theropod,-2018-english.aspx>

**SVP guidelines for research, publication, and museum work on vertebrate fossils (2008)**

<http://vertpaleo.org/the-Society/Governance-Documents/Professional-Conduct-Best-Practices-Regarding-Rese.aspx>

**SVP statement on the sale of vertebrate fossils (1999)**

<http://vertpaleo.org/The-Society/Governance-Documents/On-the-sale-of-vertebrate-fossils.aspx>