



Society of Vertebrate Paleontology

9650 Rockville Pike • Bethesda, MD 20814-3998

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

Email: svp@vertpaleo.org • Web:

www.vertpaleo.org

FEIN: 06-0906643

SVP responds to sale of a privately owned juvenile tyrannosaur that was exhibited at University of Kansas

April 10, 2019

This week, a juvenile *Tyrannosaurus rex* specimen was advertised for sale on e-Bay after having been on exhibition at the University of Kansas Natural History Museum (KUNHM). The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology (SVP) is concerned because the fossil, which represents a unique part of life's past, may be lost from the public trust, and because its owner used the specimen's scientific importance, including its exhibition status at KU, as part of his advertising strategy. These events undermine the scientific process for studying past life as well as the prospect for future generations to share the natural heritage of our planet.

Because KUNHM shares SVP's ethical concerns, its director, Prof. Leonard Krishtalka, ordered the specimen to be removed from exhibit after learning of the owner's intent to sell the skeleton at public auction. Prof. Krishtalka, in a message to SVP leadership, explained that KU had exhibited the specimen with the understanding that the owner was negotiating with one or more other museums for a direct sale that would place it in a permanent public-trust repository.

The juvenile tyrannosaur was on extended loan to KU by Mr. Alan Detrich, and was not accessioned into KU's collection nor any other public-trust repository. In his online sale listings, Mr. Detrich displayed photographs of the museum's display, announced that a scientific publication by a KU professor was in progress, and stated that considerable work on the specimen had been done at the university. Prof. Krishtalka stated that KUNHM has asked the seller to remove all reference to the museum from his advertising. (At the time of writing, Mr. Detrich had removed the museum's name from some but not all of his advertising sites; he had not removed photos of the exhibition or statements that it had been exhibited at "a museum"). Krishtalka reiterated, "We stand firmly with the ethical and policy standards of SVP".

Vertebrate fossils are rare and often unique. 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). Furthermore, 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."

Only casts and other replicas of vertebrate fossils should be traded, not the fossils themselves. Scientifically important fossils like the juvenile tyrannosaur are clues to our collective natural heritage and deserve to be held in public trust. That fossils like this are

evidence of Earth's deep past is what makes them valuable, unlike art objects or other items of trade whose value comes from human creativity and artistry. Because vertebrate fossils are rare, most of them contribute uniquely to our knowledge of the history of life. Each one that is lost from the public trust, is part of that already fragmentary history that we will never collectively recover. A sustainable trade in fossils can only be achieved if original specimens and their data are placed in the public trust where their value can be realized and replicas like those normally exhibited in museums are collected privately.

Repositories should do everything in their power to ensure that scientifically important fossils remain in the public trust. It is unfortunate that the juvenile tyrannosaur was exhibited before being securely and permanently accessioned into a repository. That action, which brought the fossil to the attention of hundreds or thousands of visitors, potentially enhanced its commercial value. Museums seldom have the budget for purchase of increasingly expensive privately collected specimens, thus making it even less likely that the fossil will find its way into a permanent repository where it can be added to the scientific body of evidence about tyrannosaurs. Mr. Detrich has tried to capitalize on the museum's good faith by using the exhibition and scientific attention as selling points. The events in Kansas could easily play out again at other institutions. The Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin is currently exhibiting and studying a privately owned tyrannosaur skull, a specimen that could just as easily be removed from the public trust as Detrich's juvenile. Similarly, a privately owned *Allosaurus* that was studied at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences was auctioned into a private collection last summer. We strongly recommend that repositories, exhibitions, and scientists stay at arm's length from specimens that are not yet permanently in the public trust.

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>

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