

Paper Number: 4517

Geoethic issues in North African and South American paleontology

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At a smaller scale than in the case of the peripatetic fossils from the Himalaya, known as the “Gupta affaire” [1], North African and South American paleontology of the late 20th Century and today continue to provide examples of misconduct in paleontological science. Most of these remain unknown outside the limited circles of specialists but could introduce confusion in the future, when contaminated, poorly constructed or unusable data may be used for regional geology or taken into account in global paleontological databases employed in paleogeography, correlations or any other Geological Science applications. As in the Gupta affaire, the “suspected” fossils came from places of difficult access –such as deserts, jungles or high mountains– with a great deficiency in valuable data. Apart from some “misplaced” fossils, the problem mainly falls upon the opportunistic individuals that use obscure journals to avoid a minimal scientific control of their published contents.

In North Africa, the best example of this type of fraudulent behavior was carried out by the Egyptian micropaleontologist Mostapha M. Iman, who published dozens of “misplaced” and “recycled” fossils (mostly taken from papers from other authors), supposedly coming from Cretaceous to Miocene formations of Libya and Egypt, who was finally exposed by a Spanish journal [2][3]. Another example of unethical behavior in North African paleontology is denounced here: the activities of Joan Corbacho, a Spanish fossil collector and trader that, without a minimal scientific knowledge, published ca. 20 papers with several dozen new trilobite taxa coming from different Cambrian to Devonian formations in the Moroccan Anti-Atlas. A fraction of the original specimens were inadequately prepared or reconstructed by local dealers, and his descriptions of new taxa are very poor and lack of confident data about localities and stratigraphic position. Despite of this, papers were published by an old private museum connected to the Catholic Church (Geological Museum of the Seminary of Barcelona), where Corbacho settled his “scientific” affiliation while acting as an amateur curator. Part of the published and figured trilobite specimens, thus “increased in value”, were later offered for sale in Internet, and often with a “certificate of authenticity” signed by the Museum’ director.

In South America, Peruvian paleontology is living a critical period dominated by impostors with high penetration in the national and social media, like the electronic engineer Klaus Hönninger or the journalist Carlos A. Vildoso. Both of them have acted as highly reputed paleontologists for more than a decade, but never published any true scientific result. They founded private businesses under the aspect of a museum and a research institute, respectively. Mr Vildoso is the chairman of the IX Latin-American

Paleontological Congress, to be held in Lima (September 20-24, 2016), while excluding from the organizing committee the most acknowledged Peruvian paleontologists.

References:

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