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Defusing the fuss over fossils

Paleontologists who condemn making profits from selling fossils are hypocrites ("Psst... Wanna Buy a *T. rex*?" SN: 12/13/97, p. 382). They themselves profit from digging up fossils—after all, they don't work for nothing.

The free market eventually makes all desired goods and services available for the least cost (assuming no collusion among sellers). The problem is not that good fossils are rare, it is that not enough of them are being found!

Concerns over excavation details are unfounded. If customers demand certain procedures with photos and logbooks, they'll get them—and the price will be reasonable, once the industry matures. Scientists will be relieved of those administrative tasks they typically despise. Instead, businessmen will do them; they are administrative experts. This will leave scientists free to do the things at which they are experts. It's called efficiency.

People who prefer fieldwork will work for a company. Those who prefer theoretical work

will stay at the university. This is the same choice facing most of us.

Welcome to the real world.

*Wayne Batteiger
Rolla, Mo.*

While I have the highest regard for professional paleontologists and collectors for museum and university collections, and I strongly agree with the need to preserve the integrity of fossil finds, I think the role of the serious amateur collector is vastly underrated. Many, if not most, professionals got their start as private collectors. Indeed, had it not been for serious amateurs, many fine displays in museums would not exist. Moreover, it seems to me that letting fossils weather out of the ground and risk being destroyed by erosion, wild animals, and so on is worse than collecting them.

While it is wrong on the part of some collectors to destroy sites or lose scientific evidence, it is much worse when professionals, under the guise of professionalism, allow these valuable artifacts to languish in dusty corners of forgotten storage rooms through neglect, lack of interest, insufficient funds, or

whatever. At least the amateur strives to protect and preserve his or her investment. Often, the best finds end up in a museum or other public display anyway.

The dealings surrounding Sue, the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, and the imprisonment of Larson, who in my opinion did a thoroughly professional job in his private business, show that the pendulum has swung too far in protecting collecting sites for professionals.

Please give the serious amateurs and private professionals the credit they deserve. They most often are *not* the destroyers of history—they are the protectors of it.

*Gene Meieran
Phoenix, Ariz.*

CORRECTION

The Electric Power Research Institute does not plan to end its electromagnetic research program this year ("EMFs' Biological Influences," SN: 1/10/98, p. 29).

Each year, religious pilgrimages attract hundreds of millions of people from around the world, not just Central America ("Sacred Secrets of the Caves," SN: 1/24/98, p. 56).

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Cover: Seismologists have detected zones of unusual rock (red areas) sitting on top of Earth's core (yellow). These patches, far underground, may contain partially molten rock and could play an important role in the planet's evolution. **Page 109** (Image: Edward J. Garnero)

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