



Comment on the letter of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology (SVP) dated April 21, 2020 regarding “Fossils from conflict zones and reproducibility of fossil-based scientific data”: the importance of private collections

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Motivation for this comment

The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology (SVP) has recently circulated a letter, dated 21st April, 2020, to more than 300 palaeontological journals, signed by the President, Vice President and a former President of the society (Rayfield et al. 2020). In this letter, significant changes to the common practices in palaeontology are requested. In our present, multi-authored comment, we aim to demonstrate why these suggestions will not lead to improvement of both practice and ethics of palaeontological research, but conversely, will hamper its development. Despite our disagreement with the contents of the SVP letter, we appreciate the initiative and the opportunity to discuss scientific practices and the underlying ethics. Here, we consider different aspects of the suggestions of the SVP in which we see weaknesses and dangers. Our aim was to collect views from many different fields. The scientific world is, and should be, a pluralistic endeavour. This contribution deals with the aspects

concerning amateur palaeontologists/citizen scientists/private collectors. Reference is made to Haug et al. (2020a) for another comment on aspects concerning Myanmar amber.

First of all, we reject the notion implied by the SVP letter that studying and describing specimens from private collections represent an unethical behaviour. The question whether privately owned specimens should be considered in scientific studies is a purely scientific question (as long as the specimens were legally obtained by their owner), and thus should be answered on the basis of the scientific problems and merits of such actions.

Amateur palaeontologists/citizen scientists/private collectors

The statements in the letter of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology (SVP) in our view shed a rather negative light on amateur palaeontologists/private collectors/citizen scientists, especially by noting that “fossils outside of the public domain, such as those in private collections and privately-operated for-profit museums that are not managed within the public trust as permanent institutions, do not meet [...] essential standards” (Rayfield et al. 2020: p. 2).

In our opinion, this statement is highly problematic. Amateur palaeontologists, or more generally, amateur scientists, contribute to science in an essential way augmenting

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