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Digging fossils in Brazil

From Max Langer, Roberto Iannuzzi, Ana Maria Ribeiro, Marina Soares, Soraia Bauermann, Patrícia Rodrigues & Carolina Scherer* (Rec'd 9 Pub'd 10 November 2010)

Sir, Martill & Heads¹ complain that "it is no longer possible to collect fossils anywhere in Brazil" and that they "were compelled to leave material behind". We of the Sociedade Brasileira de Paleontologia (SBP) were very happy to learn from their article ([Geoscientist 17.11](#)) that the Brazilian government's efforts towards preventing the despoliation of the nation's paleontological resources are achieving success.

Brazil has lost countless valuable fossil specimens in recent decades, illegally taken from the country. Most of them ended up in the hands of unknown private collectors, but many are housed in renowned research institutions all over the world. This letter is therefore aimed not at criminal fossil dealers or other "business" enterprises, but to fellow paleontologists interested in working with Brazilian fossils.

Martill & Heads are absolutely right when they say that "the international fame awarded to the Araripe Basin is the direct consequence of the efforts of scientists of many nationalities", and the SBP supports any attempt to bring scientific collaborators together. Yet this can be achieved without permanently removing Brazilian fossils from the country. It is important for foreign palaeontologists to know that, since 1942, Brazilian law forbids the ownership of fossils collected in the country, all of which belong to the Union (although housed at, and cared for by scientific institutions).

Therefore, it is illegal for any private party (individual or corporate, Brazilian or foreign) to own - let alone sell, buy, or export - Brazilian fossils. We know that illegal dealing is frequent, and we do not deny that its prevention is a Brazilian duty. That said, the government is taking action to prevent fossil dealing and to develop palaeontological research in areas where it occurs. A new set of rules concerning activities with fossils was approved this year by the nation's Mining Department (DNPM), which also confiscated fossils that were to be exported by a private Brazilian company and contacted Interpol in an attempt to rescue a collection of Brazilian fossils on auction in France.

Three years ago, the French police discovered another load of Brazilian fossils at Charles de Gaulle Airport, whose repatriation is now being negotiated. Also, the Brazilian Science Foundation (CNPq) has approved a budget of c. £5m for palaeontological research, nearly half of which is to be applied in areas where fossil dealing is a real/potential problem (such as the Araripe Plateau and the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Acre). Foreign paleontologists are welcome to work in Brazil and with Brazilian fossils, but ought to follow the current legislation of the Science and Technology Ministry (www.mct.gov.br/index.php/content/view/full/19340.html):

1. Field work has to be conducted in collaboration with Brazilian teams;
2. Fossils can be legally taken abroad for research, but must be previously registered in an official Brazilian collection and returned to the country afterwards.

Finally, we expect support from foreigner colleagues and institutions by not acquiring Brazilian fossils illegally taken from the country.

Reference

1. [Martill, D.M. & Heads, S.W. 2007. Out of Eden?. Geoscientist 17\(11\): 20-24.](#)