

1 November 1999

OPEN LETTER TO:

Dr. Peter Raven, Secretary
PRaven@nas.org
Committee for Research and Exploration
National Geographic Society
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Peter,

I thought that I should address to you the concerns expressed below because your committee is at least partly involved and because you are certainly now the most prominent scientist at the National Geographic Society.

With the publication of "Feathers for T. rex?" by Christopher P. Sloan in its November issue, National Geographic has reached an all-time low for engaging in sensationalistic, unsubstantiated, tabloid journalism. But at the same time the magazine may now claim to have taken its place in formal taxonomic literature.

Although it is possible that Mr. Czerkas "will later name" the specimen identified on page 100 as *Archaeoraptor liaoningensis*, there is no longer any need for him to do so.

Because this Latinized binomial has apparently not been published previously and has now appeared with a full-spread photograph of the specimen "accompanied by a description or definition that states in words characters that are purported to differentiate the taxon," the name *Archaeoraptor liaoningensis* Sloan is now available for purposes of zoological nomenclature as of its appearance in National Geographic (International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, Article 13a, i). This is the worst nightmare of many zoologists---that their chance to name a new organism will be inadvertently scooped by some witless journalist. Clearly, National Geographic is not receiving competent consultation in certain scientific matters.

Sloan's article explicitly states that the specimen in question is known to have been illegally exported and that "the Czerkases now plan to return it to China." In Washington, in June of 1996, more than forty participants at the 4th International Meeting of the Society of Avian Paleontology and Evolution, held at the Smithsonian Institution, were signatories to a letter to the Director of the Chinese Academy of Sciences that deplored the illegal trade in fossils from China and encouraged the Chinese government to take further action to curb this exploitation.

There were a few fossil dealers at that meeting and they certainly got the message. Thus, at least since mid-1996 it can hardly have been a secret to anyone in the scientific community or the commercial fossil business that fossils from Liaoning offered for sale outside of China are contraband.

Most, if not all, major natural history museums in the United States have policies in effect that prohibit their staff from accepting any specimens that were not legally collected and exported from the country of origin. The National Geographic Society has not only supported research on such material, but has sensationalized, and is now exhibiting, an admittedly illicit specimen that would have been morally, administratively, and perhaps legally, off-limits to researchers in reputable scientific institutions.

Prior to the publication of the article "Dinosaurs Take Wing" in the July 1998 National Geographic, Lou Mazzatenta, the photographer for Sloan's article, invited me to the National Geographic Society to review his photographs of Chinese fossils and to comment on the slant being given to the story. At that time, I tried to interject the fact that strongly supported alternative viewpoints existed to what National Geographic intended to present, but it eventually became clear to me that National Geographic was not interested in anything other than the prevailing dogma that birds evolved from dinosaurs.

Sloan's article takes the prejudice to an entirely new level and consists in large part of unverifiable or undocumented information that "makes" the news rather than reporting it. His bald statement that "we can now say that birds are theropods just as confidently as we say that humans are mammals" is not even suggested as reflecting the views of a particular scientist or group of scientists, so that it figures as little more than editorial propagandizing. This melodramatic assertion had already been disproven by recent studies of embryology and comparative morphology, which, of course, are never mentioned.

More importantly, however, none of the structures illustrated in Sloan's article that are claimed to be feathers have actually been proven to be feathers. Saying that they are is little more than wishful thinking that has been presented as fact. The statement on page 103 that "hollow, hairlike structures characterize protofeathers" is nonsense considering that protofeathers exist only as a theoretical construct, so that the internal structure of one is even more hypothetical.

The hype about feathered dinosaurs in the exhibit currently on display at the National Geographic Society is even worse, and makes the spurious claim that there is strong evidence that a wide variety of carnivorous dinosaurs had feathers. A model of the undisputed dinosaur Deinonychus and illustrations of baby tyrannosaurs are shown clad in feathers, all of which is simply imaginary and has no place outside of science fiction.

The idea of feathered dinosaurs and the theropod origin of birds is being actively promulgated by a cadre of zealous scientists acting in concert with certain editors at Nature and National Geographic who themselves have become outspoken and highly biased proselytizers of the faith. Truth and careful scientific weighing of evidence have been among the first casualties in their program, which is now fast becoming one of the grander scientific hoaxes of our age---the paleontological equivalent of cold fusion. If Sloan's article is not the crescendo of this fantasia, it is difficult to imagine to what heights it can next be taken. But it is certain that when the folly has run its course and has

been fully exposed, National Geographic will unfortunately play a prominent but unenviable role in the book that summarizes the whole sorry episode.

Sincerely,

Storrs L. Olson
Curator of Birds
National Museum of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC 20560

Ph. 202-357-33212
FAX 1-202-633-8084
email: olson.storrs@nmnh.si.edu