



**HAL**  
open science

## Putting the History of Paleontology to Work

Victor Monnin

► **To cite this version:**

Victor Monnin. Putting the History of Paleontology to Work. Palaeontology Newsletter, 2023, 112, pp.68-70. hal-04471974

**HAL Id: hal-04471974**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04471974>**

Submitted on 21 Feb 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Putting the history of palaeontology to work

In the last few years, the Earth sciences community has grown acutely aware of its lack of racial, gender and cultural diversity. As shown by the latest controversy over the repatriation from Germany of a *Ubirajara jubatus* specimen found in Brazil, palaeontology in particular finds itself at the centre of serious conversations regarding unethical practices and colonial legacies. A few examples of recent initiatives and publications illustrate the urgency of such issues shaped by the rich and complex history of palaeontology.

In 2017, filmmaker Lexi Jamieson Marsh and palaeontologist Ellen Currano launched a touring exhibition, *The Bearded Lady Project*, featuring black and white photographs of women palaeontologists wearing fake beards. This original initiative unravelled the stereotypes and gender biases that have long been defining the exclusive identity of palaeontologists and field scientists in general. In 2020, palaeontologists studying amber fossils from Myanmar were asked to stop acquiring new specimens in view of the humanitarian crisis happening in the Kachin region. This call raised the question of the extent of palaeontologists' ethical responsibilities regarding the wider ecosystem of their research. Finally, last year, a team of young scholars, led by Nussaïbah Raja and Emma Dunne, published the results of a scientometric study showing how the colonial past is still determining access to the fossil record and research opportunities.

None of these issues exists in a historical vacuum. Therefore, a better and more widely shared understanding of palaeontology's complex history could shed some much-needed light on some of the pressing challenges faced by the palaeontological community, especially by its younger and rising members.

The question is: how could the history of palaeontology be better integrated into the training of palaeontologists to foster an always more inclusive, ethical and sustainable research community? The goal of this communication is to encourage future collaborations between historians and palaeontologists for the benefit of all the stakeholders of palaeontological research.

In a recent note published in this same Newsletter (106), historian Chris Manias highlighted that "palaeontologists and connected branches of natural history have recently been engaging in highly reflective ways with the history of their fields, with an agenda towards decolonizing them". Indeed, a significant number of scientific actors have been acknowledging the complex heritage of their disciplines and the collections they work with. Recently, palaeobiologist Pedro Monarrez and colleagues published an article discussing the extractive nature of palaeontology and the various manifestations of racism and colonialism lingering in geosciences academia. Palaeoartists, such as Mark Witton, have also begun to address the often-problematic legacies of their predecessors. Such communications recognize the social and ethical benefits of investigating the history of palaeontology.

The problem is that the history of palaeontology is either not being systematically taught to palaeontology students or mostly being taught as a chronicle of 'discoveries' made by a selected few (and mostly Western men). Such a narrative provides a skewed vision of the historical development of palaeontology, ignoring not only the multiplicity and diversity of actors involved in scientific work, but also the situatedness of this work. Instead of providing the new generations of palaeontologists with the tools to think holistically about their science and understand its current ethical and policy challenges, such a vision of history prevents them from doing so. In other words, upcoming

palaeontologists do not need to learn more about the history of their discipline, they need to engage with it with a sense of purpose.

Coincidentally, the palaeontological community can rely on the recent efforts of an active and growing contingent of historians of science, who are critically revising the history of palaeontology among other Earth sciences. Many historians are now giving particular attention to the entanglements of the reconstruction of deep time with colonialism, capitalism and extractive economies. Through these new analytical lenses, the past of palaeontology no longer appears as the epic story of ‘fossil hunters’ excavating exceptional specimens around the world, but as a series of histories involving a variety of scientific and non-scientific actors evolving in different social, economic and political contexts. These efforts represent a valuable resource for the palaeontological community to actively engage with the legacies crippling its efforts in diversification and ethical advancement. Finding ways to introduce the new historiography of palaeontology to students would help them navigate through the changing landscape of ethical standards, policies and laws that characterize the palaeontological field today. Through the discussion of the history of their discipline, they could imagine more sustainable and inclusive ways of studying the deep past. Just as students are being taught that the study of the fossil record can improve our understanding of present and future ecosystems, they should also be taught that the study of the historical record of their discipline can help them evaluate and improve their own practice and institutions.

Integrating this new historiography to palaeontology curricula raises obvious logistical and methodological questions, such as: who will teach this content to students? How much time can be reasonably allocated to discussing history? Where can palaeontologists and students follow recent developments in the historiography of palaeontology and Earth sciences? Which specific issues should the teaching of history be focusing on? Where could historians and palaeontologists regularly share their respective concerns and insights? These questions can only be answered through active discussions and collaborations between historians and palaeontologists. The sharing of resources, priorities and ideas is bound to prompt the emergence of specific, practical solutions, which could in time serve as templates for more ambitious educational reforms. The relationship between the history of science and science is a convoluted one. It had and will have its ups and downs. One thing remains for certain though – it is as critics of science that historians can provide their highest form of support to the scientific endeavour. While palaeontologists wrestle with complex issues regarding the future of their community, historians of palaeontology must also reflect on their own ethical responsibilities and how they can put their expertise to work.

**Victor Monnin**

Archives Henri-Poincaré, University of Strasbourg, France