Princeton to Give Up Its Fossils

Princeton University's geology department has decided to give away most of its large paleontology collection to make way for laboratory facilities for geophysics and geochemistry. The move constitutes the coup de grace for Princeton's presence in macropaleontology and has been greeted with great dismay by paleontologists around the country. Princeton geophysicist William Bonini points out, however, that "macropaleontology has been more or less defunct here for some time," and the university must put its resources into more productive areas.

The collection of fossils and specimens is one of the largest and oldest in the country. It includes an unsurpassed accumulation of vertebrate fossils, one of the five original collections in North America, which will be transferred intact to an as yet undesignated institution. Princeton also has a collection of microfossils, which will be retained in the Department of Geological and Geophysical Sciences; paleobotanical specimens, most of which have already been loaned out to Yale University and the Smithsonian Institution, and two collections of invertebrate fossils, one of which is up for adoption. The final decision on disposition of the fossils was supposed to be made at a 21 March meeting of the board of trustees, but as of this writing, a university spokesman said it had been delayed.

> Paleontologists are distressed that Princeton is abandoning macropaleontology at a time when the field has gained new vigor.

If the university proceeds, it will be in the face of strenuous objections by a committee of paleontologists from around the country that it had invited to advise on the disposal of the collection.

Last spring, the group—from the same institutions that were being invited to bid on the collections—arrived in Princeton for a meeting, all of them prepared to "grind our own axes," according to Porter Kier of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History. But in discussions on the eve of the meeting with Princeton officials, they concluded that sacrifice of the collections would be bad for the university: "We decided the night before that we were not going to be a party to this act," says Kier. So, in what he describes as a "very heated meeting, . . . we spent the whole morning telling them not to do it."

Queried by *Science*, committee members expressed passionate opposition to the plan, which was characterized as "shortsighted," "foolish," even "tragic." Two of them said the university was "slitting its own throat," and several lamented that it was turning its back on a noble tradition of liberal education in an effort to turn itself into "Princeton Tech."

Most of the committee members felt that the Princeton geology department did not fully appreciate what it was doing. Princeton alumnus Leo Hickey of Yale's Peabody Museum says the department's "view of what paleontology is was 25 years out of date," and that several members seemed "surprised" at the current vigor and scope of the field. In the past decade, he says, there has been a major intellectual shift from description to synthesis, and paleontologists are making significant contributions to current theories on evolution, plate tectonics, and continental drift. "Now is the time when American paleontology is vigorous as never before," says Hickey.

Princeton officials were reluctant to discuss the issue. "Things are a little touchy around here," says Donald Baird, curator of the natural history museum, which will be losing about three-fourths of its total holdings. Asked about the department's reaction to the committee's views, Bonini will only say that the question had apparently not been clearly stated: Princeton only wanted to know how to dispose of the collection, not whether to do it.

Basically, Princeton's stance is that it wants to keep up with the times, and confine itself to doing a few things well rather than attempting to cover the gamut of disciplines.

In seeking advice from within the discipline, the department appears to have set most store by the counsel of Alfred Fischer, a vertebrate paleontologist who left Princeton for the University of Southern California last year. Fischer was a prominent figure in invertebrate paleontology for 28 years at Princeton; now he is at the University of Southern California, having moved away from fossils and into various other aspects of geobiology.

Fischer feels in essence that it is "unrealistic" for Princeton to try to recapture its former eminence in the field, primarily because it no longer has adequate resources to maintain the collections properly. He observes that the Princeton geology department "started out virtually as a department of vertebrate paleontology" but that the university has lacked a proper biological base to complement this for more than a generation. He says Princeton could compromise by maintaining a "low profile" in vertebrate paleontology, but this would not be enough to attract good graduate students.

Some of the paleontologists on the committee feel that Fischer did a disservice to his field, according to Malcolm McKenna of New York's American Museum of Natural History. "In order to make room for a couple of hot shots," that is, geochemists and geophysicists, "they are willing to throw away a tremendous library" of primary data, says McKenna. Philip Gingerich of the University of Michigan, a Princeton alumnus, points out that with its broad and eclectic approach to geology, Princeton supplied an environment that has hatched many of today's most creative thinkers. "Princeton will never be big, but we don't need that. We need what Princeton is uniquely endowed to do," he says. "Technical universities like MIT and Caltech don't train general geologists" or people on the interface between biology and geology. "This isn't Princeton Tech. This is a liberal arts university."

But as Fischer sees it, there's no going back. The geology department has become "very technology-oriented," and indeed it competes with MIT and Caltech for graduate students. Of the decision, he says "in some ways it's a heartbreaker. It's an issue that comes up again and again. . . . I've lost a lot of sleep over it—it's essentially an irrevocable step."—**CONSTANCE HOLDEN**