



<https://doi.org/10.11646/palaeontomology.3.3.1>

<http://zoobank.org/urn:lsid:zoobank.org:pub:3DCBFD06-6E4F-4A57-9817-54528C6AC5FE>

## International Palaeontological Society Statement

Following a mailbox of comments concerning a letter sent by the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology to journal editors on “Fossils from conflict zones...” dated 21 April 2020 calling for a ban on publications on Burmese amber, it was felt necessary to air some concerns raised for further discussion.

SVP does not represent the entire palaeontological community, but only a small part of it. As the largest group of scientists studying inclusions and compression fossils of invertebrates, palaeontologists do not support all the measures proposed by SVP’s presidential committee because they could be counter-productive.

A boycott on commercial trading, museum acquisitions and scientific publications will not help the people of Myanmar to overcome their current difficult circumstances. Instead, it will result in an increase of illegal trade, loss of scientific material/information and accumulation of fossils in private collections with a huge drawback for science in Myanmar and the rest of the world.

The letter cites journalistic articles in the popular press rather than scientific reports or peer-reviewed papers. In fact,

- not all Burmese amber comes from a conflict zone: there are at least three localities in three different provinces in Myanmar;
- income of “millions of dollars from illegal amber trade” is unconfirmed; most of the money actually comes from the trade of rubies, jade, gold, and other natural resources. In areas controlled by the government, all gem trade is operated by the Myanmar Gems Enterprise and the proceeds fund Government expenditure such as on education and health services;
- only a few exceptional inclusions, mostly of vertebrates, are extremely expensive. The vast majority of inclusions constitute insects, other invertebrates and plants. Such inclusions often decrease the jewel quality of the amber (purity is prized in Buddhism and traditional Asian cultures), and pieces with small inclusions are sold cheaply and in bulk.

Editors of scientific journals must not take on the role of censors. Science must operate within the law, *e.g.* regulations on bioethics and international agreements such as the Convention of Biodiversity and Access and Benefit-sharing, not moral values of choice which differ in different societies and change with time.

Type material should be deposited in well-established public, corporate, or recognised collections, and must be in full compliance with the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (<https://www.iczn.org/the-code/the-international-code-of-zoological-nomenclature/the-code-online/>). Type material and other published material must be held safely in trust for the benefit of researchers and educators of the world respecting all ethnic groups, ages, sexes, landowners and collectors. Apart from public exhibitions, access should be free to all scientists and interested people by prior arrangement whenever possible.

Instead of banning scientific research on Burmese amber as advocated by SVP, the following should be considered:

1. Development of due diligence measures working together with the Myanmar authorities, industry, museum curators and researchers.
2. Creation of a register of authorised amber dealers ensuring that amber sales benefit the people of Myanmar.
3. Not to publish nor review papers proposing new taxa without a clear commitment to deposit type material and other published specimens in well-established public, corporate or recognised collections.
4. Promote educational deposition of material in Myanmar to establish a national reference collection to advance Myanmar’s palaeontology and to protect Myanmar’s Natural Heritage.

In short, the scientific community should not oversimplify complex problems but work co-operatively to advance science and the well-being of people around the world.

Agreed to on this date: 26 May 2020



Est. 2001, Reg. W751230990 1.10.2015

Jacek Szwedo  
IPS President

Bo Wang  
IPS Vice-President

Agnieszka Soszyńska-Maj  
IPS Scientific Committee Organiser

Dany Azar  
IPS former President

Andrew J. Ross  
IPS former President

(This statement is drafted by the president and vice-president of the International Palaeontological Society on behalf of the Executive Committee in association with the organiser of the Scientific Committee and previous two Presidents.)