

Regulation on the Protection of Fossils Issued by the State Council of the People's Republic of China: Scientists' Researches Protected Legally—Further Explanation

With large-scale engineering projects being carried out in China, a large number of fossil localities have been discovered and excavated by responsible agencies, but still some important fossils of great value have been removed and smuggled into foreign countries. In the last three years, more than 1345 fossil specimens have been intercepted by Customs in Shenzhen, Shanghai, Tianjin, Beijing and elsewhere, and more than 5000 fossils, most of which are listed as key fossils, such as dinosaur skeletons, dinosaur eggs, saber-toothed tiger skull, etc., have been successfully repatriated from Australia, America, Canada, Italy, among other places. Of these items the stem-group bird, *Confuciusornis sanctus*, which was intercepted at Shenzhen Customs, belongs to the rarest, state-level protected fossils because of the completeness of its body, with its distinctive skeleton and feathers.

Faced with the severe need for fossil protection, China's State Council issued 'The Regulation on the Protection of Fossils', which took effect on Jan. 1, 2011, followed by the launching of the 'Classification Standard of Paleontological Fossils' and 'The List of Key Fossils under State Protection' on Dec. 20, 2011. The Cretaceous birds, Mesozoic mammals, early angiosperms and another 400 species are all at the top of list.

The core contents of the Regulation include:

1. Fossils in the Regulation refer to all body remains and trace fossils of animals and plants, which are preserved in strata formed throughout all geological history, and are under the management of the National Bureau of Land and Mineral Resources (MLR), whereas ancient ape and human fossils and Quaternary paleovertebrate fossils, according to the 'Regulation of National Relics', are subject to the jurisdiction of the State Administration of Cultural Heritages.

2. A national expert board and an office of paleontological fossils has been established under and affiliated to the Environment Department of the Ministry of Land and Resources of PRC. They are responsible for drawing up the name list of key fossils, consultation work regarding the establishment of protection zones for national-level fossils, reviewing applications for the excavation of fossil localities, and identifying key fossils in and out. All activities related to the fossils must be under the management of the board.

3. County-level governments bear indispensable responsibility for protection of fossils, and any excavation must be approved by local governments.

On Dec. 20 2011, the National Office of Fossil Protection declared that a detailed inspection to implement of the Regulations would be launched in 2012. The main inspection work contains: file management of fossil excavations; permits for in and out; record management; locality protection; storage and management of key fossils; evaluation of fossil resources, etc.

From henceforth, for those people who take fossils home after attending scientific or other conferences in China, or intend to collect fossils in cooperation with Chinese partners, please get an approval permit from the Chinese government (via MLR), or it will be regarded as against the Chinese law. This is the major difference between the new regulation and the one before Jan. 1, 2011.

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