

Speaking out against blood antiquities

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LETTERS

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THE DESTRUCTION OF Iraq and Syria's heritage has unfolded on an "industrial scale," according to UNESCO, the United Nation's cultural agency (1). In recent years, we have watched helplessly as terrorist organizations looted museums and thousands of archaeological sites and then sold ancient treasures to willing buyers in the United States, Europe, and Asia (2). After oil, these "blood antiquities" may be the Islamic State's second largest source of revenue (3). The Middle East's enduring past has become one more tragic casualty of war.

At last, we do not have to be silent witnesses to this carnage. In a rare moment of bipartisan accord, the U.S. Congress passed the Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act. Signed into law by President Obama on 9 May (4), the act will delimit the illicit antiquities market by, for example, establishing an interagency coordinating committee and imposing import restrictions on cultural materials from Syria.

Far more must be done. In a recent report, preservation advocates and legal experts (5) suggest that the U.S. Justice Department should appoint more prosecutors with expertise in heritage crimes, and that museums must become more transparent about the ownership of antiquities in their care. A recent letter by 11 major archaeological and museum organizations has also pressed the U.S. Congress to resume paying its annual dues to UNESCO (6). As one of the world's largest consumers of antiquities, the United States should continue to take action that will curtail the dark trade in blood antiquities.

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The Islamic State profits from artifacts stolen from ancient sites such as Palmyra in Syria.

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Institutionalizing creationism

BIOLOGY FACULTY WHO teach evolution at U.S. colleges and universities often worry about the efforts of creationists to include the teaching of "intelligent design" in publicly funded high school biology courses. Now we also have cause to worry about students at publicly funded colleges and universities earning science credits for learning creationism.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) is developing an Interstate Passport Initiative, funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education, which would streamline the learning outcomes for courses across institutions to facilitate the transfer of credits (1). Unfortunately, with the Passport Initiative, WICHE proposes making the creationist "teach the controversy" strategy a standard part of college biology courses. In their document "Faculty handbook: Constructing your institution's Passport block," WICHE suggests that to demonstrate scientific literacy, students should "watch the Ken Hamm [sic]-Bill Nye evolution-creation debate and evaluate the scientific evidence and arguments used by the participants" (2).

This suggestion validates creationism as science by stating explicitly that both participants have scientific evidence. Middle school, high school, and college instructors who support creationism can point to the WICHE Passport Initiative as evidence that there is a scientific debate that includes creationism. The Answers in Genesis website

has already promoted the debate as a way to get creationism into science classrooms (3).

If the goal of the curriculum is to help students use scientific evidence to debunk myths, the suggested class activity should be rephrased to read, "Watch the Ken Ham-Bill Nye evolution-creation debate and evaluate the arguments used by the participants." However, even with better wording, by including the debate in a science class, WICHE is promoting the use of the Ham-Nye debate as an example of a scientific controversy. There are hundreds of genuine biological debates, both current and historical, that good educators can make interesting. WICHE should choose real examples of scientific debates and avoid advocating for creationism in science classrooms.

A student who takes general education courses at a WICHE Passport institution will soon be able to transfer the credits to any other Passport institution. The receiving institution cannot reject individual courses from approved institutions. Currently, WICHE lists 24 public institutions representing more than 150 campuses in seven U.S. states as participants in developing the Passport Initiative. WICHE plans to expand the Passport Initiative to six more states. As the Initiative grows, more and more public postsecondary institutions will be awarding science credits for courses that include creationism. To prevent the insertion of religion into science classrooms, scientists must speak out against the Passport Initiative until WICHE removes creationism from their suggested curriculum.

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