

The esteem of the Palaeontological research in the 20th century

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Due to their geological uniqueness the Dolomites were declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2009. Over the past 200 years, great scientists have helped to uncover its history and have been able to set milestones about our knowledge on the climate change, the shifting of continents over millions of years, and the evolution of life. But gone are the great glorious times of the 19th century when, in a peaceful race, private researchers in particular strove to expand world knowledge. When Deodat Dolomieu discovered the mineral Dolomite and Roderick Murchinson and his wife Charlotte noted through observations in the Dolomites, Russia and his home country in England, that there are clearly defined geological periods, the Silurian, the Devonian or the Permian, which have been characterized by great climate changes. When Alexander von Humboldt and Leopold von Buch summarized the knowledge of nature in works that could be understood by all. When Darwin wrote down the theory of evolution and, based on it, the young German scientist Ferdinand von Richthofen recognized that the Dolomites once were coral reefs. When young Maria Ogilvie-Gordon explored the Dolomites and fought for equal rights to university studies also for women. Many lined up a grain of sand and a grain of knowledge to learn more about the course of life. But could these pioneers of science still have been able to do so today? The answer is succinct and clear: "No."

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When the classification of the Dolomites World Heritage Site in Seville in 2009 was announced, the most excited were the lift operators, the hotel industry and the construction companies.

The "Dolomiti Superski" compendium comprises more than 1,200 kilometres of slopes covered with snow from 5,000 snow cannons and connected with 500 lifts. That's 12 million square meters of destroyed world heritage. In addition, there are thousands of kilometres of roads and thousands of touristic infrastructures. All these measures were implemented by ruthlessly piercing and flattening the Dolomites with heavy equipment until, at the end, on a twisted patchwork, the World Heritage sites were added to round off the marketing. The pioneers of this work of destruction were highly decorated by the public and politicians. They found their way into the media as visionaries of the country.

We enjoy the wellness facilities of the hotels, let ourselves be catapulted upwards by the lifts, we know every disco and every après-ski restaurant. But what do we know about each other?

A few centimetres below our hiking boots or our accelerated skis, an unknown world opens up, which would be richer in

recognition than the superficial life. From which we learned what changes there were in Earth's history and how we could prepare for future events.

Is there at least a small opportunity to enrich the interested parties or visitors of this area with knowledge about the past and the origin of life or the landscape? To compress the many millions of years into a few hours through research and knowledge transfer.

May those interested in nature ponder during a walk through the mountains whether they could contribute to a better understanding of the world or not.

No! This is undesirable. Society has put effective legal rules on paper.

May the inhabitants of the Dolomites teach other interested people about the fossilised creatures inside the mountains or the geological changes during the millions of years? The answer is no.

In recent decades, the rights of natural science have been pushed into the illegality at the initiative of economic interests and their executive political bodies, with deliberate official requirements not to change this. The classification of the Dolomites as World Heritage Site due to their geological uniqueness was taken ad absurdum.

The World Heritage as Destroyer of the World Heritage

In an article (Martinetto et al., 2018)¹, several high-ranking representatives of Italian state institutions raise the importance of scientific research. In Italy, all objects "*concerning paleontology*" (*cose che interessano la paleontologia*) are state property. There is no objection to this protection status, and it would even be commendable if it placed the emphasis on study, research and cultural education. In an interesting question game, the authors of the publication discuss the current practice. Would be science students allowed to search fossils for study purposes? The answer to this question is "no" based on the legal regulation. Even the microscopically smallest fossils in a limestone require a state permit, which is difficult to obtain.

The next question was: Is for a private person allowed to keep even the most insignificant fossils at home?

Again, the answer is "no". Unless permission is granted, where there is a high risk of criminal prosecution.

Is there a dividing line between culturally or scientifically valuable, lesser or insignificant fossils? Again, the answer is "no".

Every inhabitant of the Dolomites has built his house with fossil limestone, every child takes home a fossilized shell once in a lifetime or revels in the oddly shaped relics of the past and wants to know more about it. Martinetto speaks of a "*patata bollente*" a "*hot potato*" All of them could be sentenced to prison in accordance with the established case law.

A final provocative question of the authors was therefore whether the interested people should "*throw away*" or "*dispose*" these natural objects.

It is the capitulation of scientific thinking to economic thinking. Kilometres of ski runs may continue to be dug into the untouched countryside, huge structures may be built inside the mountains for short-term pleasure, but no objects of nature may be taken for the purpose of study or science. The gold diggers of the destruction of nature have taken the gold diggers of knowledge and research into custody.

The inhabitants of the Dolomites became the natives of North America in the 19th century.

The laws of the rulers made them always guilty. With generous grace, the governing elite, committed to economic interests, granted when it promised to benefit them, and punished those who proudly persisted in ancient culture and traditions.

Martinetto discusses the case of Michael Wachtler, who found a world fossil with the discovery of *Megachirella wachtleri* as the oldest known ancestor of snakes and lizards (Squamata) in 1999, which has been discussed from the front page of the renowned science journal "Nature" (Simões et al.)² to the world's most important newspapers. For this, Wachtler was dragged to court and sentenced to prison. In addition, he was sent a criminal notice for 306,302 Euros, plus further legal costs to cover the "*total damage to the state administration*" that was supposed to have resulted from his publications, research and the discovery of *Megachirella wachtleri* (Wachtler, 2018)³.

When I was still young, I decided to move into the woods and mountains, with the ambition to learn from nature. Many years of my life I spent on the abysses of the rocks and let nature beat me bloodily. This pain was much easier to bear than doing monotonous work down in the valleys.

I split stone slabs where roads or slopes were dug and enjoyed the most inconspicuous of what I found in them. Saurians, petrified plants, footprints left millions of years ago, clams and corals of tropical seas came to light. It gave me great pleasure when I recognized one or the other fossilised plant as fern or conifer. And even bigger, if after days of searching, I was able to assign the cones or the fertile parts found in the rocks to the branches and trunks.

Maybe in some good years I managed to split a few square meters of rocks. It was less than one of the giant excavators in the terrain destroyed in a minute. But the gain in knowledge of this small area was many times greater than the entire army of construction machines could.

After years, I had accumulated enough material to decipher a 240-million-year old living world. I approached a Dutch scientist and together we published a thin book-

let about these new cycads and conifers (Wachtler M. & van Konijnenburgh – van Cittert, H., 2000)⁴.

I met my government in the belief that I would explore the mountains to show it that all hotels, ski runs roads are less important than additional knowledge of our past. How we came into being and where we developed meant extra profit for all mankind! What climate catastrophes changed life in the past and what they might be in the future! My mistake was to believe that society and politics if not inspired it, at least tolerated these multiple findings so important for me.

One day I was sitting on an over-widened forest road and was splitting plates that the excavators had thrown over the slope. Suddenly I was taken away by police force. What I did was strictly forbidden. I would have broken a lot of laws in my actions. They didn't just mean that I had damaged the forest road. More serious was the fact that I had done research, which was not allowed without permission. And that I would not abide by a so-called twenty-four hour information law. I didn't know what it was, but apparently I could be sentenced to prison for it.

In 1998, I discovered the Kühwiesenkopf and Piz da Peres fossil sites in the Prags Dolomites. Such a rich Early to Middle Triassic life-world with its terrestrial animals, fish and plants came to light that I felt like Columbus in the discovery of America. Everything was new and unknown. I published to share it with everyone and was happy to be able to compare the plants of today with those of prehistoric times. And because I increasingly saw it as a matter of concern to show these finds to the delight of everyone, I founded the Museum Dolomythos in Innichen. Here the interested ones could be inspired by the wonderland of nature. No longer getting drunk in apré-ski bars, monotonously racing on the flat-rolled slopes or hanging out for quick pleasure.

No! People should learn more about the inner enrichment of creative slowness. Learning to hike through the mountains and observe. The Museum Dolomythos grew and

grew. I was happy to show off nature. And it was just a fossilized wave from ancient times that told of tropical seas. Many of the visitors liked it.

In the fall of 2010, the police surrounded the museum with a dozen officers. They confiscated everything and presented me as a criminal. Some 5,000 objects, everything I loved and valued, they took away from me. Even taking photos for the purpose of continuing my scientific publications was forbidden under penalty for me. Disrupting and destructive, they loaded the museum's valuables into a truck and drove off to lock them away in some storage rooms in Bozen.

I am the last person to blame a society for what it does. The politicians and their executive bodies are elected by the people. When times are bad for research, and short pleasures are in the foreground, it is zeitgeist, spirit of the times.

But it is permissible for the individual to point out other possibilities. Especially if he takes it without complaining upon himself to be punished with penalties and imprisonment.

I am committed to this. "*The criminal turns the innocent into a criminal in order to gain a free hand for his crimes*". But should we all be forced to put short-term gain of pleasure before long-lasting gain of knowledge? Without revelling. We would then become companions of the Empire.

Sodom and Gomorrah

I don't blame anyone. Not the Museum of Natural Science in Bozen, where my finds are stored in dusty deposits and the best ones are presented to the public without "*soul*" for the tourists. Every museum director does his best to ensure that only his museum gets into the media due to the high number of visitors.

I do not make accusations to the curator of paleontology (paleobotany) at the Naturmuseum Südtirol Evelyn Kustatscher of publishing my findings in different articles as hers in order to make her name more significant (Bauer, K., Kustatscher, E., Dütsch, G., Schmeißner, S., Krings, M.; van Konijnenburg-van Cittert, J.H.A., 2015⁵; Tintori, A., Lombardo, C., Kustatscher, E., 2016⁶; Kustatscher, E. et al., 2019⁷; Renesto S., Kustatscher E., 2019⁸; Renesto

S., Kustatscher E., Gianolla P., 2020⁹; etc). This can only be interpreted as unethical scientific work. The "*publish or perish*", as reprehensible as it may be, is only the smallest part of the social and scientific problem.

The all-destructive iceberg is the uninterested mass of people. On one side are the lords of money, who measure their lives at the bank account. With unscrupulous selfishness, they managed to lull young people full of overflowing life goals into slaves, to push skilift chairs under the asses of the masses every day, to take money from those acquiring ski-passes, to show kindness and forbearance for an activity which, after a minute's thought, everybody would describe as "*worse than an animal life*". Year after year, in large-format advertisements, representatives of the Empire search for a thoughtless mass who, for a starvation wage, is willing to become comrades in fulfillment. And this for the rest of their life.

It is understandable that society classifies as criminals all the free forest-man or those who walk in nature with open eyes. They do not help with their taxes and levies to promote politicians to Gods.

In one of the most beautiful parables of the Bible, God himself went to Abraham to tell him that he would be forced to destroy the two cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if the sinful conduct of their inhabitants was indeed as bad as he had heard. Abraham replied to God that it was unjust to destroy the guilty and the innocent without distinction. God finally relieved Abraham if he could find at least ten decent people. The next day two angels came to Abraham's nephew Lot, who receives them surprisingly hospitable. But soon the inhabitants of Sodom urged the decent Lot to be able to fall on the beautiful angels. This was the only successful experience in Sodom and Gomorrah. Their doom was sealed by God raining down sulfur and fire. Only Abraham and Lot, as well as their clan, were helped to make an adventurous escape.

Parables are allegories that can be applied to similar situations. It is the equation of two situations in order to see from the first what the second is going towards. Where are we heading in the 21st century?

About criminal forestmen

One day, when I climbed back over the wildly rugged rocks of the Seceda in the Gröden Valley, a hardly trodden path took my interest. Suddenly I came across a lonely tent and a stove and saw a ruffled person who introduced himself as Egon Moroder-Rusina. I recognized him as one of the best cartoonists the country has ever had. In his life he had exposed many politicians and their superficiality. Then he had decided, probably to enhance his sense of life, to move into this wilderness framed by Swiss stone pines. He explained to me that his only activity was now to paint "*the Nothingness*." He did not know whether he would make it to the end of his life.

He asked about my interests. I explained to him that I was looking for fossil plants in the dangerous rock walls. With joy I explained to him that I had found 260 million years old precursors of firs and araucarias. And that from this moment on they did change only a little till today. And that my doing like his would not bring any money.

Moroder-Rusina told me he shouldn't be here. The authorities would have forbidden him. I was looking towards the horizon. Mastodontic lifts brought tourists to the Seceda within minutes. There were plenty of restaurants and bars. I told him that even to me was not allowed to dedicate myself with inner passion to the expansion of knowledge. We shaken hands and drank wine together.

From 2011 onwards, I moved my research to the neighbouring Italian province of Trentino. There I met the forest man and herb collector Féro Valentini. One day he took me to a place in Tregiovo in the Val di Non, where he claimed that fossilized grasses could be found. When he split the first plates, I was amazed at the ginkgos and coniferous branches. They were as they are today, but 280 million years old and new to science. Although the Austrian geologist Michael Vacek had already identified petrified plants in these layers in 1882, the site was forgotten and served as a garbage dump.

Throughout the winter, Féro split stone slabs. As a connoisseur of today's plant world, it was easy for him to understand

the past. In the spring, he showed me his findings. Many new plants from the Permian period were between them, including the oldest cycads and pines. He donated them all to the Natural Museum of Trento (MUSE) in the belief that he would be able to pass on new knowledge to a new generation. They all thanked him superficially. Shortly thereafter, he received convictions, which went into the thousands.

How is it possible that the most conscientious nature lovers, who stand for their whole lives with their principles about the destruction of nature, can be punished by a society of nature destroyers? How is it possible that their actions for a better future are not recognized? Most of the people praised Fero's power to fight back with all his modest means. They realized that he was standing up for a good cause and was brave, but otherwise they shrugged because they didn't care.

The courts, however, convicted him each time for apparently failing to follow state laws. But even his opponents couldn't prevent his growing appreciation. Plants were named after him, and all the people who met him and listened to his words found him to be a simple man of the mountains that honestly fought for the interests of nature. He was sentenced to be acquitted by a higher, uninfluenced government. And those who destroyed nature were praised by businessmen and are nevertheless condemned in retrospect. Thus, in spite of all his defeats, his fame spread through the ages.

The Empire doesn't want nature-loving natives. It does not want lovers of slowness and quiet research. The Empire, and by that I mean politics and the economic interests associated with it, wants superficial pleasure and visible fortune and money. It only attempts to turn science into capital.

The celestial disk of Nebra is not exhibited at the discovery site, but in the city of Halle, the Ötzi, the Iceman not in the poor Val Senales, but in Bozen, *Megachirella wachtleri* not in the Dolomites but in Bozen. Great discoveries are made solely as a source of tourist marketing. It is not the importance to mankind that interest them, but the value of money.

It was only when the Dolomites had been devastated from the bottom to the top that it was thought that another terra incognita would not have been touched. The commercialization by the insertion as World Heritage Site. Many were astonished, like Howard Carter after the discovery of Tutenchamun, that such a treasure had not been noticed before. This error should be corrected all the more quickly. Within a short time, thousands of proposals and plans were available. Experience-gondolas, World Heritage terraces, Mountain-Disneylands were meant to complete the imperfection of nature in the human sense.

The Empire devised a diabolical trick: a peculiar class society was to judge it: on one side, the henchmen of the State research institutions in the form of museums and universities. Underfunded, under-staffed and under-equipped with inadequate technical resources, they were required by law to ensure that natural thinking did not prevail, like Cerberus the Hellhound. The Empire washed its hands like Pontius Pilate. Not the loftiest claim to advance knowledge about the evolution of living beings, to discover clues to the why and how of climate change, to answer questions about our geological past, were the focus now, but the suitability for commercialization.

The aim was to silence today's Deodat de Dolomieu, Alexander von Humboldt, Roderick and Charlotte Murchinson, Leopold von Buch, Achille de Zigno, Giuseppe Ragazzoni, Maria Ogilvie-Gordon.

They had discovered the egg of Columbus to change their researches into crimes. From now on, private researchers should be forbidden by law to conduct science. Only state institutions would be able to do so. And they were denied the admission of skilled workers and the money tap was blocked.

Humanity shouldn't consist only of oblivion? It's more than remembering. To all those who became researchers in order to get away from money thinking, could we not meet again today, not only as sick people who lament over our sick bodies, but as healthy people who congratulate each other on the progress of science? To show our children how our lives have evolved from the very beginning.

To me, every grain of sand studied in the ocean is far more important to research than a cement-wall on a mountain peak. There were times when the individual researcher, in the sense of the Roman art promoter Maecenas, was seen as a source for improving our humanity. There can never be a perfect society which regards the searching individual as an enemy.

An empire, by which I mean our country and its politicians, should clear the way for a more perfect society. Is that to be believed, so presumptuous, if they have existed before—albeit with errors!

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