Fossil Collecting

After reading Ann Gibbons' 'News & Comment' article "Claim-jumping charges ignite controversy at meeting" (14 Apr., p. 196) about recent allegations of "claim jumping" in Ethiopia against members of the Institute of Human Origins research team, we believe it is necessary to comment.

We emphatically state that the Institute of Human Origins' Hadar Research Project has never conducted research outside its permit boundaries, which are approved annually by the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Sport. The work of the international team at Hadar will withstand any legitimate scrutiny, as will our scrupulous attention to the permit process in Ethiopia.

Can Money Buy Happiness?

Many of the members of the international Hadar Research Project signing this letter have worked in Africa since the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is a serious matter that such an experienced and respected team is being accused of "claim jumping" and "stealing" fossils. Even setting aside the issue of integrity, those familiar with site research will understand the practical reason one would not consider such a move. Fossils collected outside an allotted permit area are useless. If a researcher illegally collected fossils, they would be of no value to the finders, because publication of the finds would be an admission of theft. If the finds could not be published, then they would have no value to the researcher.

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ILLUSTRATION: C. FABER SMITH

Land of contention. Fossil-rich site in Ethiopia that is the focus of dispute.

The Random Samples item "Money isn’t everything" (24 Mar., p. 1765) describes research which arrives at the conclusion that, as the fraction of "very happy" people in affluent countries (~30%) does not rise with increased average income per capita, the successful pursuit of money is not an important factor in the pursuit of happiness, at least in these countries.

One can, however, give the data a completely different interpretation: people's happiness depends mainly on their level of wealth compared with that of other people immediately around them, that is, the "keeping up with (and surpassing, one hopes) the Jones’s" effect. This would mean that, unless you are in the top 30% of the income bracket of your society, you are probably not happy. For most people in these societies (not all), the pursuit and