

editorial

It was one of those serendipitous coincidences that delight an editor's heart. Across our desk as we worked on the current issue devoted to paleontological research came a gem of a mini-essay by Stephen H. Lekson, Curator of Archaeology at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, NM. It appeared in the Jan.-March 1992 issue of **Contact**, the Southwest Region Interpreters Newsletter and was forwarded to **Park Science** by Glen Kaye of the SW Regional Office. Lekson's article goes beyond mere guidelines for interpretation of prehistoric findings. He offers, instead, that far rarer commodity, *wisdom*.

Lekson's subject deals with the reason that science and belief systems often clash. They are "simply too different in structure, strategy, and intent" to be reconciled. Moreover, he says, "there are good reasons not to make the attempt."

Science and belief systems, Lekson observes, are related to culture in very different ways. Belief systems are "integral to their cultures," whereas science attempts to minimize the ways that culture infringes on knowledge. . . . "it consciously attempts to shed cultural biases." Therein lies the first difference.

Belief systems are internally coherent; they are *believed*. They may be challenged, but "at any one moment it must be believed that a belief system is correct for all time." Science, on the other hand, is open to correction. As Lekson points out, with science "it's OK to be wrong." Science *learns* through findings that disprove prior theories. Thus, the second fundamental difference between belief systems and science: "Belief systems are always right; science is always prepared to be wrong – and usually is."

The third major difference springs logically from the second: "Belief systems are inextricably bound up in their cultures; they are always right; they are constant. Science is explicitly trying to escape culture; it is always wrong; and it is always changing."

The wisdom lies in Lekson's admonition to interpreters:

"First, understand the differences between belief systems and science. Second, never try to judge belief systems against science, or science against belief systems. *They are not comparable*. Third, present both views – and the function of both views – as separate, equally valid *realities*."

In conclusion, Lekson writes:

"Science and belief systems are incompatible and incomparable. It is the interpreter's challenge to present them intelligently and intelligibly, without exacerbating the real (and potential) conflicts between the two. We cannot let one override the other. But at the same time, we are dishonest if we gloss over their differences or offer facile blendings of the two."

"The best approach is one that is honest and open, and that recognizes the validity of two very different ways of knowing."