NEWS LESSON

What a Record Price Buys, and What It Costs



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Can something be both private property and public heritage?
2. What obligations, if any, come with owning a scientific object?
3. How should a country regulate fossils found on private land?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**attribute**	☐	A	large in size or amount
2	**genus**	☐	B	the tool an auctioneer taps to end the bidding
3	**arithmetical**	☐	C	not named or known
4	**specimen**	☐	D	one example of an animal or plant, kept for study
5	**substantial**	☐	E	feel great wonder and surprise
6	**unidentified**	☐	F	to do with simple sums with numbers
7	**marvel**	☐	G	a scientific group of related animals, bigger than a species
8	**hammer**	☐	H	say that a fact or idea comes from a particular source

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A Nanotyrannus skeleton fetched $47.3m in New York. The interesting question is not what it is worth, but what ownership of a scientific object means.

1 Sotheby's estimated the skeleton would make between $6 million and $9 million. Twelve minutes and six bidders later it sold for $47.3 million, which the auction house describes as the second highest price ever paid for a dinosaur. Nothing about the specimen changed during those twelve minutes, which is a reasonable summary of what an auction measures.

2 The object itself is genuinely rare. Found in 2019 by Jodi Pierson on her own land in the Hell Creek Formation of Garfield County, Montana, and named after her, it comprises some 191 fossil bone elements, runs about 19.6 feet from nose to tail and belonged to an adult animal. It is a Nanotyrannus, a smaller and faster tyrannosaur that shared the late Cretaceous with T. rex around 67 million years ago, and one of only three substantial skeletons of its kind known to science.

3 Its classification deserves a careful sentence. For decades some palaeontologists argued that specimens of this type were juvenile T. rex rather than a distinct genus. Sotheby's position is that the genus was confirmed last autumn and that over 150 morphological differences separate the two. That is the auction house's account of a scientific question, offered while selling the object it describes, which is a reason to attribute it rather than simply repeat it.

4 The criticism from researchers is not about money as such. Thomas R Holtz Jr of the University of Maryland made two arithmetical points. Excavating, preparing and mounting a skeleton of this kind costs perhaps a million dollars at the outside, so the price represents a trophy premium rather than the cost of the science. Meanwhile American institutions holding and studying such material are closing or under threat over sums roughly a tenth of what Jodi fetched, so a buyer who genuinely cared about palaeontology could have bought vastly more of it.

5 The sharper argument concerns access, and it turns on a distinction the market cannot represent. A fossil is simultaneously property and evidence. As property it can be owned, displayed and resold. As evidence it is only useful if it can be measured, sampled, scanned and re-examined by people who have not been born yet, using methods not yet invented. Holtz's conclusion is bleak and logical: a specimen in a private lobby, inaccessible to researchers, is for scientific purposes no different from a specimen still in the rock. Linda Ivany of Syracuse University framed the positive version, arguing that such fossils belong where scientists can study them and the public can marvel at them.

6 One detail keeps the picture honest. The skeleton was found on private land, which under United States law is what made the sale legal, and the proceeds are not the hammer price: fees and costs come out before any seller sees it. The buyer remains unidentified and may yet lend or donate the specimen, which is the outcome every scientist quoted was hoping for. Until then, a rare animal that survived 67 million years in the ground has an owner nobody can name.

Sources: The Guardian, Rare Nanotyrannus skeleton sells for $47.3m at New York auction. Picture: .

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer implies that Sotheby's has a financial interest in how the dinosaur is classified. T F NG
2. The writer suggests the skeleton became more valuable during the twelve minutes of bidding. T F NG
3. By Holtz's figures, the price of Jodi could have covered the shortfalls at American institutions several times over. T F NG
4. The law is likely to be changed to prevent such sales. T F NG
5. Holtz argues that a fossil in a private collection still keeps some scientific value. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

arithmetical	bleak	distinction	fetched	inaccessible	juvenile	represent	trophy

1. A small wooden chair from the 1700s _____ ten times its estimate at the sale yesterday.
2. After three failed harvests, the farmers' outlook for the winter was _____ .
3. To the collector, the object was less a source of knowledge than a _____ to display.
4. Lawyers draw a careful _____ between owning an object and owning the right to study it.
5. A single price cannot _____ everything a rare object is worth to a researcher.
6. The bones were small and thin, which suggested a _____ animal that had not yet reached full size.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Researchers compared the _____ features of the two skeletons, such as skull shape and bone structure. (MORPHOLOGY)
2. Sotheby's account of the genus deserves a degree of _____ , given that it is selling the specimen. (SCEPTIC)
3. A skeleton locked in a private vault is _____ to the researchers who might study it. (ACCESS)
4. The price is wildly _____ to the cost of excavating and mounting a comparable skeleton. (PROPORTION)
5. The buyer's _____ makes it impossible to predict whether the skeleton will ever be lent. (ANONYMOUS)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some phrases are fixed, and the preposition cannot change. Check the word before the gap, then decide whether it is a dependent preposition or part of an idiom.

at **from** **in** **on** **over** **under** **with**

1. A fossil that nobody can examine is no different _____ a rock in the ground.
2. The sale was legal _____ American law, which lets landowners keep what they find.
3. Preparing a skeleton costs perhaps a million dollars, _____ the outside.
4. The dispute centres _____ who should have access to the fossil.
5. The argument is rooted _____ the difference between property and evidence.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. The article treats the fossil as property and as evidence. Can the law serve both?
2. Sotheby's described the scientific classification while selling the specimen. How much weight would you give that?
3. A record price draws attention to palaeontology. Does the publicity offset the loss of access?

9 Role-play: a skeleton for the museum

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the museum director

Your museum is short of money. You want the new owner to lend the skeleton to the museum for a few years. Explain why the public and scientists need to see it. Ask for a promise.

Student B · the buyer

You've just bought the skeleton for $47 million. You'd like to keep it at home, but you might lend it. Ask what the museum can offer you. You can say yes, no, or yes with a condition.

Useful phrases

We'd love to show it to the public.

I paid a lot of money for it, and it's mine.

Scientists can't study it if it's in your house.

What would the museum offer me?

I'd lend it for two years, but only if you put my name on it.

Let's agree on a deal we're both happy with.

Afterwards, tell the class: did the buyer agree to lend the skeleton, and was that fair?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 H · 2 G · 3 F · 4 D · 5 A · 6 C · 7 E · 8 B

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 T · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 fetched · 2 bleak · 3 trophy · 4 distinction · 5 represent · 6 juvenile

6 Word forms

1 morphological · 2 scepticism · 3 inaccessible · 4 disproportionate · 5 anonymity

7 Language focus

1 from · 2 under · 3 at · 4 on · 5 in

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