NEWS LESSON

Who Should Own a $47 Million Dinosaur?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Should important scientific objects be allowed to have private owners?
2. Why do people pay enormous sums for rare things?
3. What is a museum for, beyond display?

2 Key words

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

1	**bidding**	☐	A	a big organisation, such as a museum or university
2	**estimate**	☐	B	a careful guess about how much something is worth
3	**remains**	☐	C	a group of related living things, bigger than a species
4	**genus**	☐	D	the offering of prices at an auction
5	**landowner**	☐	E	what is left of a dead animal or person, such as bones
6	**institution**	☐	F	difficult to understand because it has many parts
7	**identified**	☐	G	named or recognised
8	**complicated**	☐	H	a person who owns an area of land

3 Read

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

A rare skeleton sold in New York for far more than anyone expected. Palaeontologists are less interested in the price than in where the bones go next.

1 The bidding lasted twelve minutes. Six buyers competed by telephone and online, and when it ended, a dinosaur skeleton had sold for $47.3 million, making it what Sotheby's called the second most valuable dinosaur ever sold at auction. The auction house's own estimate had been $6 million to $9 million.

2 The skeleton is called “Jodi”, after Jodi Pierson, who found the remains in 2019 on privately owned land in the Hell Creek Formation in Garfield County, Montana. According to Sotheby's it measures around 19.6 feet from nose to tail, stands about 9.6 feet on its mount and comprises roughly 191 fossil bone elements. The size and the development of the bones indicate an adult animal.

3 Jodi is a Nanotyrannus, described by the auction house as a fast, highly specialised carnivore that lived alongside Tyrannosaurus rex at the end of the Cretaceous, about 67 million years ago. Its identity has a complicated history. Some researchers long argued that such specimens were adolescent T. rex rather than a separate animal. Sotheby's states that the genus was confirmed last autumn and that more than 150 differences in bone structure distinguish it from its larger relative. Jodi is one of only three substantial Nanotyrannus skeletons known to science, and the first to reach the market since that confirmation.

4 There is a legal point worth noting here, because it explains why the sale could happen at all. The remains were on Pierson's own land, and in the United States fossils found on private property belong to the landowner. It is also worth separating the headline from the payment: an auction price is not what the seller receives, since fees and costs are deducted first.

5 A record price for a rare fossil might sound like good news for palaeontology. Several scientists disagree, and their objections are practical rather than sentimental.

6 Thomas R Holtz Jr, a tyrannosaur researcher at the University of Maryland, noted that while the sale was taking place, one American natural history museum was closing and another was under threat, over shortfalls amounting to roughly a tenth of Jodi's price. He estimated that excavating, preparing and mounting a skeleton like this costs around a million dollars at most, so a well-funded museum could assemble several good specimens for the price of this one.

7 His central concern is access. The buyer has not been publicly identified. If the skeleton is donated to an institution, researchers can measure, sample and scan the bones, including with techniques nobody has invented yet. If it ends up decorating a private house, Holtz argued, it is effectively lost to science and the public, no different from being left in the ground.

8 Linda Ivany, a professor of evolutionary palaeoecology at Syracuse University, put the case for public ownership more plainly to the New York Times: fossils like this should remain where scientists can study them and children can be astonished by them.

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. Holtz believes the price paid for Jodi was far more than the cost of preparing a similar skeleton. T F NG
2. Holtz thinks a skeleton like this costs tens of millions to excavate and prepare. T F NG
3. An auction price is not the same as the amount the seller receives. T F NG
4. Sotheby's has refused to identify the buyer. T F NG
5. Sotheby's describes Nanotyrannus as the larger of the two dinosaurs. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

adolescent	assemble	confirmed	deducted	objections	sample	scan	shortfalls

1. A teenager is often described as an _____ rather than a child or an adult.
2. The council closed two libraries because of serious budget _____ .
3. Tax and other charges are _____ from your pay before the money reaches your account.
4. Several residents raised _____ to the plan to build a car park.
5. With enough money, a large museum could _____ a team of experts and a full collection.
6. Later tests _____ that the bones belonged to an adult.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By the time the bidding ended, the price _____ far above the estimate. (RISE)
2. Six buyers _____ by telephone and online. (COMPETE)
3. The skeleton _____ "Jodi", after Jodi Pierson. (CALL)
4. Jodi _____ in 2019 on privately owned land in Montana. (FIND)
5. If the skeleton is donated to an institution, researchers _____ to measure, sample and scan the bones. (BE ABLE)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some prepositions are fixed after a verb, noun or adjective. Look at the word before the gap and learn the whole phrase.

as	for	from	in	on	to	with

1. More than 150 differences _____ bone structure set the two animals apart.
2. The auction house described the animal _____ a fast, highly specialised carnivore.
3. Several scientists object _____ the sale of fossils to private buyers.
4. A museum's budget can depend _____ donations from the public.
5. The new owner may be responsible _____ looking after the skeleton.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

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

1. Holtz says the money could have funded several museums. Is that a fair comparison?
2. The buyer has not been named. Should buyers of fossils be identified?
3. Does it matter who owns a fossil if the public can still see it?

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

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 T · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 adolescent · 2 shortfalls · 3 deducted · 4 objections · 5 assemble · 6 confirmed

6 Verb forms

1 had risen · 2 competed · 3 is called · 4 was found · 5 will be able

7 Language focus

1 in · 2 as · 3 to · 4 on · 5 for

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