

News

SICB boycott New Orleans in stand on science education

Every year at the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology (SICB) meeting – held in a different city annually – the Executive Committee decide the location of the meeting 2 years hence. On most occasions this is an uncontroversial decision, but when SICB President Richard Satterlie and the Committee met this January in Boston, MA, the decision was much more divisive: to choose between hurricane-devastated New Orleans or Utah's Salt Lake City. 'Any other year New Orleans would have been a shoo-in,' says SICB President Richard Satterlie. But 6 months earlier, Louisiana's Governor Bobby Jindal had signed Senate Bill 733, the 'Louisiana Science Education Act', and after much debate this action proved grounds enough for the SICB Committee to decide to snub New Orleans in favour of Salt Lake City.

The SICB committee informed Governor Jindal of their decision in a widely publicised letter on 5 February 2009. Although Governor Jindal has not responded to Satterlie's letter, the New York Times reported on 15 February that Kyle Plotkin, a spokesman for Governor Jindal, said 'That's too bad, New Orleans is a first-class city for a convention'.

So what is so disconcerting about the piece of legislation that made SICB decide to take its flagship meeting elsewhere? After all, the legislation seeks to enshrine 'critical thinking' as a pillar of science education in Louisiana. However, according to Satterlie, and many of the bill's opponents, the legislation provides a loophole that could open up the possibility of creationism being taught alongside evolution in the science curriculum.

The legislation (<http://www.legis.state.la.us/billdata/byinst.asp?sessionId=08rs&billtype=SB&billno=733>) starts out innocuously by stating that its aim is 'to promote student's critical thinking skills and open discussion of scientific theories,' and even mentions evolution as one of the theories that teachers should encourage students to think about critically, logically and objectively. But then the legislation goes on to state that teachers 'may use supplemental textbooks... to help students to understand, analyze, critique and review scientific theories in an objective manner'. According to Barbara Forrest, of the Louisiana Coalition

for Science (LCS), it is the coded language of 'supplemental textbooks' that would 'permit the use of creationist supplementary materials such as the Discovery Institute's intelligent design textbook, the deceptively titled "Explore Evolution", in public school science classes'.

The organisations that sponsored the legislation also concern the SICB committee. According to Forrest, a philosophy professor at Southeastern Louisiana University writing on the LCS website, the bill was backed by two procreationist organisations, the Louisiana Family Forum and the Discovery Institute.

SICB's Satterlie says 'I have no objection to this discussion in a philosophical context, but not in the science curriculum'. As a commitment to science education is one of SICB's main objectives, the organisation feels that science teaching should focus on the principles of the scientific method and adhere to the fundamental scientific tenet of testable hypotheses. As creationism, or 'intelligent design' as it is currently styled, is untestable by scientific methods 'it would be comparing apples and oranges,' Satterlie explains.

'This is not a happy decision,' says Satterlie and adds 'we are not pleased that we are doing this,' but he hopes that SICB's actions will prove stronger than the American Institute of Biological Sciences' plea to Governor Jindal to veto the legislation. 'This time we are taking a firmer stand with more than ink behind it,' says Satterlie and he hopes that other states that are currently considering similar legislation may be forced to consider the potential economic impact of boycotts by other scientists.

The influence of creationism on the science curriculum in the United States is sometimes difficult to understand from a European perspective. However, we are optimistic that the influence of the religious right on the US political agenda and science education will diminish under the current administration and that support for creationism as a 'scientific alternative' to evolutionary theory will also decline.

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