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Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



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The war continues . . .

Posted on March 5th, 2009 by earle holland

We're clearly in an anti-science age!

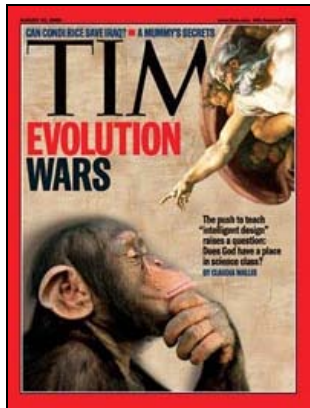
That seems to be an odd thing to say when the new administration's budget is more supportive of research agencies than the federal budget has been in years. Plus funding in the so-called "stimulus bill" provides substantial new monies for research directed all across the science spectrum.



We seem to be putting our money where our mouth is in support of research, so how could we be anti-science?

Consider the following:

In spite of the resounding defeat in 2005 that the [Dover \(PA\) school district trial](#) handed to supporters of [intelligent design](#) and opponents of [Darwinian evolution](#), support for these non-science views hasn't waned.



In Iowa, a state legislator has introduced a bill called the [Evolution Academic Freedom Act](#) that if passed would support the notion that alternative theories of evolution – like intelligent design – fall under the protection of academic freedom and can be presented as viable possibilities in the science classroom. More than 50 University of Iowa faculty have petitioned against the bill, which is in subcommittee but not expected to pass.

Similar legislation has been proposed in the states of Florida, Alabama, New Mexico and Missouri and has actually been passed in the State of Louisiana. While a few states have quelled legislative efforts to open science classrooms to non-testable ideas, the anti-evolution issue is still alive and threatening.

On another front, even after the [UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), the [National Academy of Sciences](#) and dozens of the major science organizations around the world have repeatedly agreed that the effects of global climate change have, in large part, been caused by human

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activity, the population still seems split between believers and deniers.

The **Pew Research Center for the People & the Press** released a **national survey** earlier this year that showed that of the 20 major issues people cited as most important for the Obama Administration to address, global climate change was dead last with only 30 percent of the public including it as important.

Recent **Rasmussen polls** showed that **only 41 percent of the public think that humans are at fault for global warming, while 44 percent believe the climate change is caused by long-range planetary trends.** In a related poll, **54 percent of the public blamed the news media** for making global warming seem worse than it is.

And even though the **American Meteorological Society**, which certifies many local weathercasters on television news stations, **supports the idea that humans are involved in climate change**, a sizeable proportion of those weathercasters are outspoken in their opposition to the idea that humans have played a major role in its cause.

Lastly, and perhaps of less significance, **The Scientist** newspaper reported that Senator John McCain has recently been using the social media engine **Twitter** to lambast some of the research funding slated to come from the stimulus bill. He's specifically targeted research aimed at blueberry production, catfish genetics, switchgrass genetics, grape production and fish management as supposed boondoggles unworthy of support.

The publication's readers were quick to point to the direct economic implications of such research to the states where it will be done. But the whole episode reeks of a return to **Senator William Proxmire's** attacks on research in the 1970s and '80s with his **Golden Fleece Awards** given for what he saw as nonsensical research funded by government money.

Ultimately, science is an easy target. Inherent in its practice is its openness to critiques. The "facts" of science will always be corrected, changed, modified, enhanced and altered over time as our understanding improves. Opponents of science recognize this and use it to their advantage.



Researchers and research institutions need to understand this sad truth, and prepare accordingly. *Earle Holland*

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[Dave Mosher](#) // Mar 6, 2009 at 4:09 pm

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Great summary of the battles on the front lines, Earle. This is a real go-to piece.

[Christopher Mims](#) // Mar 6, 2009 at 5:18 pm

As long as the birth-rate among anti-rationalists exceeds the rate of lateral transmission of rationalism to their children from their peers, this will continue to be the reality, no?

Ironic that evolution doesn't seem to be in favor of the creation of organisms capable of comprehending the mechanisms of their becoming.



EJ // Mar 7, 2009 at 4:22 pm

We're clearly in a non-science age when a theory — a theory, yes, theory — is taught as historical fact. Darwinian evolution is a scientific theory, but when believed or taught as the only plausible theory or as straight-out fact sheds its scientific mantle and evolves into pseudo-scientific religion. By retreating to science, and the context in which Darwin's theory belongs, a significant aspect of this dispute can be ended.

[earleholland](#) // Mar 7, 2009 at 6:04 pm

EJ: Darwinian evolution is, in fact, a scientific theory, but a scientific theory differs from the concept of theory in conversational English. That is, a scientific theory can be tested. The overwhelming majority of scientists worldwide accept evolution as the prevailing and most rational explanation available, and the one which continues to be validated by experimentation and observation. In science, calling something a "theory" does not denigrate it in the way that you suggest and that most of the public consider it. Since the ideas for origins that are competing with evolution — namely creationism and so-called intelligent design — cannot be tested, therefore they are not scientific and have no place in science education. Folks can believe anything they want to but believing something is so doesn't qualify it as science!__EMH

[Michael Payday](#) // Mar 7, 2009 at 10:29 pm

I don't think humans have no effect on the climate, but to say that we are primarily responsible for the climate of the earth is silly to me. Earth's climate is cyclical in nature, it's always been changing. The whole globe was covered in ice once, and that doesn't seem to be the case today. I would say we could reduce our effect on things, but thinking about cost-benefit analysis here, very much not worth it. Better to spend time and resources preparing for a change in the climate rather than trying to slow down the inevitable.

As far as evolution goes, the theories behind evolution still do not explain the origin of life. Intelligent design and evolution can work together. A divine creator made life on this earth. Evolution caused the

speciation to occur. Can't they get a long?

The one thing working against evolution is biological classification in my opinion. We have what, 5 or 6 kingdoms? Half of them fungus or bacteria of some kind? If we all originated from the same life form, then couldn't all life be traced back to one life form? It seems the highest level of classification, other than saying "life" is the kingdoms, so there's no one characteristic all life has in common it seems to me.

Either way, speciation leaves a lot of questions for me. The transition from water to land seems impossible to imagine for one. Not to mention certain things like jaws, eyes, hair and other things that seem hard to explain.

[earleholland](#) // Mar 7, 2009 at 11:03 pm

Michael: No one has said that humans are "primarily responsible for the climate of the earth," as you stated. What nearly all knowledgeable climate scientists have argued is that humans have influenced a major portion of the climate change at least over the last half-century, and probably longer. That impact has been an added burden on the normal cyclicity of the planet's climate and has accelerated the rate of change. The increase in fossil fuel use by humans has accelerated the proportion of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to a point where many experts fear it may be irreversible. Saying that "a cost-benefit analysis" suggests that it isn't "worth it" to try to "slow down the inevitable" seems unbelievably callous for the millions of people who will be harmed by climate change globally.

The point about the conflict between evolution and intelligent design is simply that, regardless of one's belief in a creator, ID is simply not science and has no place being taught in science classes. Since there is no way to experimentally test the existence of a creator, it isn't science. As to the points you raise about your own questions about the veracity of evolutionary theory, I'd suggest that your understanding of it is quite weak. The fact that those points "seem hard to explain" only means that your understanding of current science is lacking. Exclamations for jaws, eyes, hair and such have all been well explained by science.__EMH

[Persipidus](#) // Mar 10, 2009 at 9:49 am

This is an interesting article. I don't think humans are the sole cause of global warming however I do feel we may have sped up the process. A few weeks ago I saw a television show on Nostadamus saying that December 2012 would be the apocolypse for a few reasons. One is that this is the end of the Mayan Calender but more interesting is the specific planetary alignments with the stars that has not occurred since the last Ice Age. Any thoughts?

Kate // Mar 10, 2009 at 7:20 pm

Good post, Earle. Almost everything you mention is a result of public misunderstanding of science and how research is conducted (case in point the individual that misunderstands that in science a theory only becomes a theory after there are volumes of evidence to support it, and

very few scientific experiments to prove the hypothesis false, which is a common misconception).

This both inspires me to continue my endeavors in science writing, and discourages me in the same; does it ever feel like you've gotten through to someone?!

[earleholland](#) // Mar 10, 2009 at 8:42 pm

Kate: Sure it does! Otherwise, why would we keep up the effort?

Researcher Jon Miller, in decades of studies on the public understanding of science and on science literacy, divided the potential audience of the public into several groups. Basically, he said that those folks who liked science didn't need to be courted with communications — they'd pay attention regardless. Likewise, the people who hated science — the "Chicken Little" folks — ignore science until they're directly and physically threatened, so they can be ignored in communications efforts. That leaves a sizeable middle group who can be attentive to science if we explain it right. So those are the folks we focus on, and in truth, we are successful very, very often. Thanks for the comment. ___EMH

[Robin Lloyd](#) // Mar 19, 2009 at 1:41 pm

Ultimately science is an easy target — great point. Thanks. I've not heard this summed up so well until I read this last graf you wrote. I'll keep it handy.

Kate // Mar 23, 2009 at 11:57 am

You're exactly right—those are the people we want to get through to, and the reason I've chosen a career in science writing. Thanks for making me feel better about it!

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