

Creationism has Long History

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Editor:

This is a clarion call to educators and scientists:

Creationist rhetoric is proving unreasonably effective in persuading school boards and state legislatures across the country that "creation science" is an alternative scientific theory and should therefore, in fairness, be taught as such in public school science classes. In its effect, this was the upshot of the New Mexico State Board of Education decision of last August, which the State Legislature last month allowed to stand by tabling a bill that would have mandated conformity with national science teaching standards that include biological evolution and the age of the Earth. Creationist rhetoric influenced these decisions.

Creationism has been an organized movement in this country for about three decades. It is, to some degree, orchestrated nationwide and is well funded. During this period, several different approaches to getting "equal time" in science classes have been tried: One of the main tactics involved lines of litigation, which, eventually, wound up before the U.S. Supreme Court in the mid-1980s.

After the court found that creationists was a religion, not a science as claimed, litigation was abandoned in favor of a "grassroots" approach involving politics, school boards, and letters to newspapers and magazines. With this approach, creationists are enjoying considerable success.

To counter this grassroots tactic, educators and scientific people need to organize their efforts to at least some degree. Fortunately, there already exists a statewide group, based in Albuquerque, dedicated to countering the claims of pseudoscientists and their ilk, as well as to promoting excellence in science education generally. This loosely organized group, "New Mexicans for Science and Reason," has been focusing on creationism and "UFO-ism" because of limited resources, but is amenable to taking on any

pseudoscientific claim, particularly if relevant to New Mexico. To find out more: det@rt66.com; 869-9250: or 296-1467.

John Baumgardner's latest letter (April 3) provides a good example of the creationist rhetoric discussed above. In it, he steps us through an exercise in large number arithmetic to prove, purportedly, that there hasn't been enough time for evolution to have taken place. The problem is not with his numbers -- well known in the literature -- it's that they're beside the point. These probability calculations are appropriate only, for "non-sticky" objects like marbles or billiard balls and are inappropriate for the real world where atoms exhibit valence bonding and can spontaneously form elaborate structures like crystals and amino acids. Natural selection is not just random trials, but is necessarily also a way of saving the successes while discarding the failures. If there were any solid science behind Baumgardner's arithmetic, it could win him instant fame (and a trip to Stockholm) for proving that the genesis of life from non-life is impossible. Why don't you publish it, John? This is typically the nature of creationist rhetoric, which is crafted to appeal to non-scientists.

That said. I still must agree that the prebiotic origin of life appears to be dauntingly complex, and present science has only some attractive ideas about it, not a real theory to explain it. This is currently an active area of research involving chemistry experiments as well as computer modeling, and what may be discovered in the future is impossible to predict. Yet the complexity is so great that achieving a theory compelling enough to exclude other possibilities reasonably could well lie a century or more in the future.

In closing. I'd like to quote from a recent essay on the Heaven's Gate cult by the outstanding science writer Timothy Ferris: "Though science is stronger today than when Galileo knelt before the Inquisition, it remains a minority habit of mind, and its future is very much in doubt. Blind belief rules the millennial universe, dark and rangy as space itself."

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