



The North Texas

Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

Web News

by John Blanton

The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.

Skeptics, this will be an all-creationism column.

Newsweek weighs in

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-07-04.htm#monkey>

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/56432>

Jonathan Alter, writing in the 15 August 2005 issue commented on the Kansas education war, that's been going on since 1999.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

Offering ID as an alternative to evolution is a cruel joke. It walks and talks like science but in the lab performs worse than medieval alchemy.

A teacher in Kansas, where war over Darwin in the schools is still raging, calls the theory of intelligent design "creationism in a cheap tuxedo." Great line, but unfair to the elegant tailoring of the Discovery Institute, the Seattle-based think tank that has almost singlehandedly put intelligent design on the map. Eighty years after the Scopes "monkey trial," the threat to science and reason comes less from fundamentalists who believe the earth was created in six days than from sophisticated branding experts and polemical Ph.D. s who are clever enough to refrain from referring to God or even the Creator, and have now found a willing tool in the president of the United States.

The Pentagon was then spending money to spiff up the presentation of science, because students were not finding it sexy enough, and our national defense needs were coming at risk. Sex aside, right-wingers were putting out the word that biology is atheistic. Sort of like automobile mechanics.

EVENTS CALENDAR

August Program

Saturday 16 August 2008
2 p.m.
Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Alison Smith with SAPS

Board Meeting/ Social Dinner

Saturday 23 August 2008
7 p.m.

Al Amir
7402 Greenville Ave # 101,
Dallas

Let us know if you are coming.
We need to reserve a table.
NTS Hotline 214-335-9248

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The North Texas Skeptics is a tax-exempt 501 (c) (3) scientific and educational organization. All members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings on topics of current interest or social events.

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President Bush wasn't helping matters much by publicly announcing, "Both sides ought to be properly taught... so people can understand what the debate is about." The president had not been listening to his own science adviser. John H. Marburger III denied such a debate actually existed. He told *The New York Times*, "Intelligent design is not a scientific concept."

Stephen Meyer of the Discovery Institute claims ID uses a scientifically valid "inference to the best explanation" to back up its theories. That might be good enough for a graduate course in the philosophy of science (and the ACLU should not prevent it from being discussed in high-school humanities and philosophy classes), but the idea of its being offered as an alternative to evolution in ninth-grade biology is a cruel joke. Its basic claim—that the human cell is too complex to be explained by natural selection—is unproven and probably unprovable. ID walks like science and talks like science but, so far, performs in the lab worse than medieval alchemy.

Ignorance comes of age

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-07-04.htm#Louisiana>

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2008/07/louisiana_governor_signs_evolu.html

This is from *Education Week*. It's not just Republicans anymore. Democratic State Senator Ben Nevers of Louisiana sponsored this latest adventure into the intellectual desert. The law not so much allows the teaching of creationism as it requires the state board of education to "allow and assist" the promotion of critical thinking concerning scientific theories. Evolution is mentioned. Automobile mechanics is not.

Louisiana Governor Signs Evolution Bill

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal has quietly signed into law Senate Bill 733, which allows local education agencies to use supplemental classroom materials that will help students "analyze, critique, and review" scientific theories, including evolution.

Scientific organizations, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, urged the governor to veto the bill, which he did not.

The impact of the Louisiana law would seem to depend on the actions taken by school districts and individual teachers. Opponents of the law have predicted that it could prompt a wave of lawsuits, if schools or educators seek to denigrate evolution in favor of religious-based views of life's development, such as creationism, or if they attempt to promote "intelligent design."

Americans United weighs in

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-07-04.htm#AU>

http://www.au.org/site/News2?JServSessionIdr009=p677zibu94.app7b&abbr=pr&page=NewsArticle&id=9913&security=1002&news_iv_ctrl=1241

Americans United is not a science organization. Its main goal is to ensure Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution is not subverted. They would prefer churches not become institutions of the government. The following is a press release from AU:

Americans United Will Monitor Implementation Of New Louisiana Anti-Evolution Law

Friday, June 27, 2008

National Watchdog Group Says Litigation Will Follow If Measure Is Used To Promote Religion In Public Schools

Americans United for Separation of Church and State today warned Louisiana officials that lawsuits will result if the state's new anti-evolution law is used to introduce religion into public school classrooms.

Gov. Bobby Jindal this week signed the legislation (SB 733), which allows teachers to use "supplemental materials" when discussing evolution. The measure was pushed by the Louisiana Family Forum and the Discovery Institute, two Religious Right groups that advocate creationist concepts, and is widely seen as an effort to water down instruction about evolution.

"I am very disappointed that Gov. Jindal signed this unwise and unnecessary measure," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. "Louisiana has a long and unfortunate history of trying to substitute dogma for science in public school classrooms. Let me state clearly and upfront that any attempts to use this law to sneak religion into public schools through the back door will not be tolerated."

Lynn urged Louisiana residents to monitor the situation in their local communities and report any potential violations to Americans United. He noted that the organization has a new chapter in Louisiana and that activists on the ground will be watching developments in the state very closely.

Supporters of the bill, including the Discovery Institute and Sen. Ben Nevers, its primary sponsor, have insisted that the measure is not intended to

promote religion. Americans United says it will hold them to that.

"I've heard from plenty of people in Louisiana who are embarrassed by this law and are concerned that it's just another attempt to bring religion into the public schools," said Lynn. "I call on all concerned residents of Louisiana to help us make sure that public schools educate, not indoctrinate."

Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.

Masters of disguise

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-07-04.htm#Forrest>

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/06/louisiana_do_forrest_and_the_n.html

The Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture (CSC) is the main force behind Intelligent Design. It's fortunate they don't waste their time doing science, because propagandizing is what they do best.

Few with a positive body temperature doubt Intelligent Design is religiously-motivated, so the CSC makes an industry of insinuating belief in evolution is also a religion. The world wonders. Do they realize they are saying "We're bad, but you're are just as bad."

The CSC devotes a separate Web site, Evolution News and Views, to blogging against evolution. Larry Caldwell is an attorney, and he operates Quality Science Education for All. He is a supporter of Intelligent Design, and he dissipates a lot of energy suing people who make fun of ID. He recently posted the following:

Louisiana: Do Forrest and the NCSE Really Oppose Religious Instruction in Evolution?

Reading Barbara Forrest's impassioned plea on Richard Dawkins' website against the Louisiana Science Education Act, one might get the impression she opposes injection of religion in biology classes (even though the Act isn't intended to do that).

Indeed, when I followed the link to her Louisiana Coalition for Science "open letter" to Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, I found the following statement, with which I agree wholeheartedly:

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is violated when the government endorses a sectarian doctrine. . .

On the other hand, Forrest is on the board of directors of the National Center for Science Education.

As recently reported here, the NCSE partnered with the University of California on the Understanding Evolution website, on which the UC endorses the sectarian doctrine of religious organizations, including the United Church of Christ. By Forrest's own admission, the UC is in violation of the Establishment Clause.

The truth is that Forrest and her colleagues at NCSE have no problem with government endorsing religious doctrine in relation to evolution, as long as it is a religious doctrine they agree with.

Caldwell concludes:

Despite Forrest's current public posturing to the contrary, she and her colleagues at the NCSE really believe that a good "science" education should include a healthy dose of religious instruction in biology class.

Perhaps that's why Forrest's colleague, Scott, sometimes refers to herself as the "Evolution Evangelist."

Aren't these creationists just *too* cute?

Missing The Wrist

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-07-24.htm#Zimmer>

<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/loom/2008/07/14/746/>

Casey Luskin works for the Discovery Institute, where his chief job seems to be legal maneuvering for so-called "academic freedom" bills and writing creative posts to their Evolution News site. He has a degree in law and an M.S. in Earth Sciences. Carl Zimmer writes popular science pieces for The New York Times and other publications, such as Discover magazine, not to be confused with Discovery Institute. Zimmer's blog takes notice of Luskin's blog, giving us some insight into the level of science at Discovery Institute. The blog contains embedded links to other references, so you will need to read this on the Web to follow the links:

The subject of the post is a 375-million-year-old fossil that helps reveal the transition of our ancestors

from the water to land, known as Tiktaalik. I've written about Tiktaalik here, and you can get more details from the book *Your Inner Fish*, written by Neil Shubin, one of Tiktaalik's discoverers. (Here's a review I wrote in *Nature*.)

Luskin claims that Neil Shubin calls Tiktaalik a fish with a wrist, but "from what I can tell, Tiktaalik doesn't have one." The bulk of the post is taken up by Luskin's fruitless search for a diagram or some other helpful information, either in Shubin's book or the original papers. He is frustrated not to find a picture showing a wrist on Tiktaalik compared to the wrist of a tetrapod (a land vertebrate). This sort of "evidence" leads Luskin to conclude that Shubin has something to hide. "In the end, it's no wonder Shubin chose not to provide a diagram comparing Tiktaalik's fin-bones to the bones of a real tetrapod limb," he writes.

Instead, Luskin is forced to read a scientific paper. He writes:

So we are left to decipher his jargon-filled written comparison in the following sentence by sentence analysis:

1. Shubin et al.: "The intermedium and ulnare of Tiktaalik have homologues to eponymous wrist bones of tetrapods with which they share similar positions and articular relations." (Note: I have labeled the intermedium and ulnare of Tiktaalik in the diagram below.)

Translation: OK, then exactly which "wrist bones of tetrapods" are Tiktaalik's bones homologous to? Shubin doesn't say. This is a technical scientific paper, so a few corresponding "wrist bone"-names from tetrapods would seem appropriate. But Shubin never gives any.

Um...Shubin did give them. They are called the intermedium and ulnare. (I just double-checked, for example, in *Vertebrates* by Ken Kardong, on p.332.) Shubin and his colleagues found two bones in the limb of Tiktaalik that bear a number of similarities to the intermedium and ulnare in the tetrapod wrist—in terms of their arrangement with other limb bones, for example. That's why Shubin and company refer to the bones in Tiktaalik's limb by the same two names. They are homologous—in other words, their similarities are due to a common ancestry.

Concluding:

If Luskin were offering a real scientific hypothesis, he could do an [analysis] of lungfish, Tiktaalik, tetrapods, and other vertebrates—comparing not just

their limbs but their heads, spines, and so on to figure out their evolutionary relationships. That's exactly what Shubin and his colleagues did in their original paper on Tiktaalik. They compared 114 traits on species from nine different lineages of tetrapods and their aquatic relatives, including the lineage that produced today's lungfish. And that analysis shows that Tiktaalik is more closely related to us than to lungfish.

Luskin apparently doesn't need to do this sort of science. He can just announce what seems right to him personally.

Zimmer has added an update pointing to more on the topic by biology professor PZ Myers:

http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2008/07/i_guess_eyonymous_wasnt_on_the.php

I guess 'eyonymous' wasn't on the LSAT

Posted on: July 14, 2008 5:47 PM, by PZ Myers

Nick Matzke, one of the world's leading experts in detecting absurdities in creationist texts, has discovered a real howler from Casey Luskin. Luskin is complaining that he, Junior Woodchuck lawyer for an intellectually bankrupt propaganda mill, can't find the wrist bones in Tiktaalik when Neil Shubin, world-class paleontologist, is directly describing them. This is, admittedly, a fairly high-level discussion by Shubin, but it's amusing that Luskin isn't tripped up by the science — it's his command of the English language that lets him down.

Carl Zimmer writes about science regularly for the New York Times and magazines such as Discover, where he is a contributing editor and columnist.

He is the author of six books, the most recent of which is Microcosm: E. coli and the New Science of Life. His website is carlzimmer.com and his address is [blog at carlzimmer dot com].

Luskin at the bar

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/07/tiktaalik_roseae_wheres_the_wr.html

For your amusement, follow the link to Casey Luskin's original post on Evolution News & Views:

Tiktaalik roseae: Where's the Wrist?

I recently picked up *Your Inner Fish*, a highly simplified science book written for a popular

audience by paleontologist Neil Shubin that promotes the alleged intermediate fossil between fish and tetrapods, Tiktaalik roseae. On page 83, Shubin's book contains a nice diagram comparing the skull-components of a human head to the skull of a primitive craniate fish. It's a vague comparison that does little to convince that fish-heads formed the template for mammal heads. But that's not the focus of Shubin's book. The primary feature that excites Shubin and other evolutionary paleontologists about Tiktaalik isn't found in its head: it's that this fossil is allegedly "a fish with a wrist ... part fin, part limb." (pg. 38-39) What is conspicuously missing from Shubin's book is any diagram (like the one comparing fish heads to human skulls) comparing the bones of the "wrist" of Tiktaalik to a real tetrapod wrist, thereby demonstrating that Tiktaalik actually has a wrist.

Hoping to find a diagram that shows how the bones in Tiktaalik's fin are similar to a tetrapod wrist, I turned to Shubin's original paper in *Nature*, "A Devonian tetrapod-like fish and the evolution of the tetrapod body plan." The abstract of this paper claims that Tiktaalik has "a functional wrist joint," so I presumed that there would be further discussion in the paper about the supposed wrist, perhaps with the diagram I sought. So I searched the paper: not only is there no diagram comparing wrists, but the word "wrist" is not found anywhere else in the paper; the only occurrence of the word "wrist" is the assertion in the abstract, quoted above.

Luskin is anything if not thorough. The complete post recreates illustrations from the original paper in *Nature* and pursues a lengthy analysis, concluding with:

In other words, the joints can flex or straighten. Shubin may be correct, but this is nothing special: the same could be said for living fish species that are capable of using their fins to prop themselves up. And they certainly don't have wrists.

In the end, it's no wonder Shubin chose not to provide a diagram comparing Tiktaalik's fin-bones to the bones of a real tetrapod limb. Where's the wrist? From what I can tell, Tiktaalik doesn't have one.

What is so fascinating about these posts on *Evolution News & Views* is their similarity to the arguments by the young earth Creationists. Discovery Institute argues publicly they are not creationists and (sometimes) not really against evolution. Yet their pitch to the inner circle is wall-to-wall anti-evolution. Where have you gone, Henry Morris? "Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you." OK, Morris was not DiMaggio, and Luskin is not Robinson, but sometimes I wish we had the old time creationists back.

For you nostalgia buffs, here is a link to *Impact*, a publication of the young earth creationist organization Institute for Creation Research, founded by the late Henry Morris: <http://www.icr.org/article/2902/>

Other than showing a little more scientific awareness, plus a direct reference to the Bible, *Dinosaurs vs. Birds: The Fossils Don't Lie* by Timothy L. Clarey, Ph.D. could easily find a home in *Evolution News & Views*. □

Chuck Gafford responds

Chuck Gafford contributed the piece “*Expelled Review*” in last month’s newsletter. That issue also carried a response from the NTS. We asked Chuck to contribute additional comments, and he has provided the following. Chuck would like other readers to comment; since he feels open discussion will be helpful for all to obtain a better understanding.

Readers are invited to respond to Chuck Gafford. We will print selected contributions from readers —



On the movie, I’m disappointed in Ben Stein if he’s trying to make the major point about the “wall of evolution-science” vs. ID out of professors losing their jobs and tenure over ID if these people were not really “expelled” over their beliefs in ID. Academia is intended to be a place where various opinions and theories can be expressed and discussed in an open forum. Certainly being granted tenure at a university is challenging and sometimes people have to move on to another university to reach that status. If many or all of the people in the movie were not “expelled” based on the reported information then one of the premises of the movie would be flawed. These examples sound like Stein didn’t make a very good case in the idea that people were “fired” or “let go” from their discussion of ID in scientific papers.

Unfortunately it seems that since the most vocal of the ID people are “young-earth creationists” including the Discovery Institute. In my view and that of “old-earth creationists,” the earth is approximately 4 billion years old. The idea that the earth is 4,000 to 10,000 years old contradicts obvious and overwhelming scientific proof. The issue of the earth being only 6,000 years old originally came from Bishop Ussher in the

mid-1600s who attempted to calculate the timeframes referenced in the Bible. He decided that man was created in 4004 BC which did not include what I believe is the proper translation of the Hebrew word for day which should be translated “time period” or “era.” Ussher’s notes were placed into Bibles for hundreds of years and often became accepted as part of the Bible for many people.

I believe that because of the flaws of the ID theory from the “young-earth creationist” viewpoint that this has led to the difficulties of winning the debate in presenting ID in public school science classes. The idea of a “Designer” is not necessary a discussion of theology rather than science, but rather to a review of any valid theory based on factual information. By reviewing the facts then a conclusion can be reached by individuals who have studied and researched the facts.

In terms of supporting the theory of “intelligent design” with the “old-earth creationist” viewpoint, a look at astrophysics and the number of items (really over 200 in the universe and many around our solar system) that require fine-tuning with the mathematical odds can be seen to be so high that it requires a “Designer” using factorials. Certainly the Benoit Mandelbrot book “*The Fractal Geometry of Nature*” is worthy of reference and is one of the leading books on the mathematical design of patterns in nature. □

North Texas Skeptics

Future Meeting Dates

August 16, 2008
(Alison Smith with SAPS)

September 20, 2008

October 18, 2008

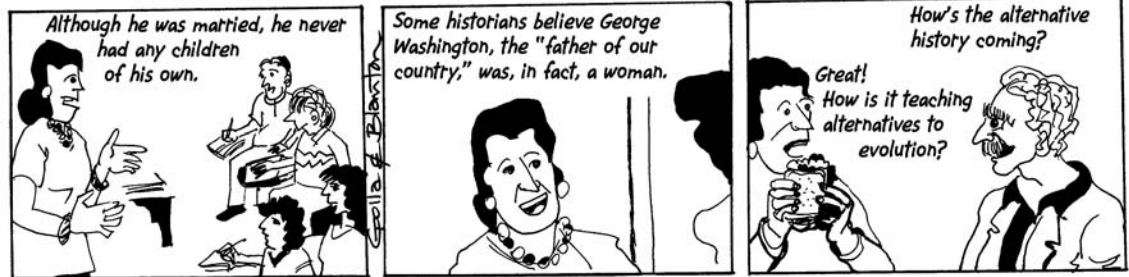
November 15, 2008

December 20, 2008

January 17, 2009

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton.
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Joe Barnhart shot

Joe Barnhart is a technical advisor for the North Texas Skeptics. He retired as professor of philosophy and religion at the University of North Texas. Last year he sent us an e-mail—he was off to Tennessee.

On a Sunday in late July Joe and his wife went to church where an off-kilter person with a shotgun attacked the congregation. Two were killed, and the police arrested the gunman. Joe was one of the wounded. Here is a story by Bud Kennedy:

http://www.star-telegram.com/news/columnists/bud_kennedy/story/793926.html

For your reference, the story is also featured in the Skeptical News section on the NTS Web site. If it's not on the main news page, then look for it in the back issues:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news.htm>

As I always advise skeptics, y'all be careful out there.

John Blanton

Natural News

Natural News is a Web site catering to, what else, "Natural Medicine." Want to know everything that's wrong with mainstream medical science? Look no further. It's all here.



Creator Mike Adams and artist Dan Berger have a collection of delightful cartoons to illustrate the pitfalls of science-based medicine. They currently are taking delight in the tribulations of the FDA in tracking down the source of salmonella that has sickened more than 1000 recently. Even skeptics of Natural Medicine will share their chuckle at a billion-dollar bureaucracy that can't seem to get its hands around the problem. They have graciously agreed to allow us to reprint this for your enjoyment.

Check it out:

<http://www.naturalnews.com/>

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community, the media, and the public. It also promotes science and scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues.

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