



The North Texas

Skeptic

Volume 23

February 2009

Number 2

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

NTS Board Meeting and Elections

The North Skeptics is run by people who show up. On January 17 our members met for the annual board meeting and elections. Members present nominated and elected the following to the **Board of Directors**:

Erling Beck
John Blanton
John Brandt
Elizabeth Hittson
Jack Hittson
Claudia Meek
Barbara Neuser
Mike Selby

The board elected the following to fill official positions within our organization:

John Blanton, President
John Brandt, Vice President
Mike Selby, Secretary
Barbara Neuser, Treasurer

Also appointed to unofficial positions were:

Keith Blanton, Newsletter Editor
John Blanton, Web Master
Claudia Meek, Meetings and Social Director

EVENTS CALENDAR

February Program

Saturday, February 21, 2009, at
2 p.m.

Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Expelled

The NTS will present a review of
the creationist video *Expelled:
No Intelligence Allowed*.

Actor and TV personality Ben
Stein stars in this creationist
critique of modern science and
its rejection of Intelligent Design.
In the video, Stein makes odious
comparisons of "Darwinism" with
the Holocaust and with the brutal
Stalinist regime.

The NTS Board meeting and social dinner

Saturday, February 28, 2009
7 p.m.

Caribbean café
1000 Webb Chapel Road
Carrollton, Texas 75006

Phone: (972) 418-7071

North Texas Skeptics

Officers

President ····· John Blanton
 Vice President ····· John Brandt
 Secretary ····· Mike Selby
 Treasurer ····· Barbara Neuser

Staff

Newsletter Editor ····· Keith Blanton
 Webmaster ····· John Blanton
 Meetings and Social Director ····· Claudia Meek

Board of Directors

Erling Beck, John Blanton, John Brandt, Elizabeth Hittson, Jack Hittson, Claudia Meek, Barbara Neuser and Mike Selby

Directors Emeritus Tony Dousette, Ron Hastings, Mark Meyer, John Thomas, Joe Voelkering, and Mel Zemek

Scientific and Technical Advisors

Joe Barnhart, Professor of Philosophy
 Raymond A. Eve, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, UT Arlington
 Timothy N. Gorski, M.D., Physician
 Ronnie J. Hastings, Ph.D., Science Teacher
 Anthony P. Picchioni, Ph.D., Licensed Professional Counselor
 James Rusk, Director, Russell Planetarium
 Lakshman S. Tamil, Ph.D., Engineer
 John Thomas, Attorney

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.

Our newsletter, *The North Texas Skeptic*, is published monthly by The North Texas Skeptics, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794.

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The fun did not end there. John Brandt purchased for The North Texas Skeptics a 26-inch flat-panel display for future presentations and videos. The expense, at \$300 plus tax, will be offset by savings on AV rentals for our meetings and presentations. John Brandt made a sizable monetary contribution to the NTS treasury to help offset this capital outlay. Other members kicked in with donations, as well. Since the NTS is a 501 (c) (3) organization, donations are tax-deductible. Let not your generosity be constrained. Send money.

Some have asked, "How do I pay my dues, and how do I contribute money to the NTS?"

A good question. We prefer checks, since that leaves a nice paper trail for tax audits and such, but cash works, as well. You will get a receipt. Send checks to:

The North Texas Skeptics
 P.O. Box 111794
 Carrollton, TX 75011-1794

Or, you can use PayPal through our Web site. Find the **Donate** button on our site's front page and click. PayPal does not have a separate action for "dues." Everything is considered a donation. Follow the directions.

Items of significant monetary value will also be accepted. We need creationist books as well as serious books about evolution versus creationism. We also enjoy receiving creationist videos to use in our monthly presentations.



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.

This will be an expanded edition of Web News. This month we celebrate the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin, the notable English scientist who, along with Alfred Russell Wallace, developed the idea of natural selection to account for the evolution and development of all life forms on this planet. In doing so, Darwin posed a dilemma for a host of true believers, who cling to supernatural explanations of life in the face of a daily growing mountain of scientific evidence. As a result, Charles Dar-

win has given employment and enjoyment to a small army of skeptics, who waste the remaining spare time in their lives baiting and debating an intransigent body of doubters. Thank you, Mr. Darwin, and happy birthday.

Darwin's Evolution

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2009-01-19.htm#Siegfried>

http://www.sciencenews.org/view/feature/id/40014/description/Darwins_Evolution

While Tom Siegfried worked as the science editor for *The Dallas Morning News*, Skeptics looked forward to his weekly column. He is a top-tier science writer, and he always presented a properly skeptical view of creationism and other forms of voodoo science. He was also generous enough with his time to appear before our group on two or more occasions. Here, from *Science News*, is his take on the life of Darwin:

Darwin's life and his contribution to science

By Tom Siegfried January 31st, 2009; Vol.175 #3

When baby Darwin arrived on February 12, 1809, modern science was also in its infancy. Dalton had just recently articulated the modern theory of the chemical atom, but nobody had any idea what atoms were really like. Physicists had not yet heard of the conservation of energy or any other laws of thermodynamics. Faraday hadn't yet shown how to make electricity from magnetism, and no one had a clue about light's electromagnetic identity. Geology was trapped in an ante-diluvian paradigm, psychology hadn't been invented yet and biology still seemed, in several key ways, to be infused with religion, resistant to the probes of experiment and reason.

Then came Darwin. By the time he died in 1882, thermodynamics possessed two unbreakable laws, chemistry had been codified in Mendeleyev's periodic table, Maxwell had discovered the math merging electricity and magnetism to explain light. Lyell had established uniformitarianism as the basis for geology, Wundt had created the first experimental psychology laboratory, and science had something substantial to say about how life itself got to be the way it was — thanks to Darwin's perspicacious curiosity, intellectual rigor, personal perseverance and power of persuasion.

Tom Siegfried currently has three books listed on Amazon.com.

Beautiful Math: John Nash, Game Theory, and the Modern Quest for a Code of Nature

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0309101921/thenorthtexaske>

Strange Matters: Undiscovered Ideas at the Frontiers of Space and Time

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0425194175/thenorthtexaske>

The Bit and the Pendulum: From Quantum Computing to M Theory-The New Physics of Information

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0471399744/thenorthtexaske>

Texas In The Spotlight (Again)

Wow! Is it that time again? It seemed only a few years ago the creationists came to town to explain why school children should be taught to doubt Darwin. Well, they're back. Glenn Branch is Deputy Directory of the National Center for Science Education (NCSE). He writes a weekly newsletter, and recently he covered the latest creationist shenanigans in Texas. The following is excerpted from a recent newsletter:

Evolution education update: January 23, 2009

The battle over teaching evolution in Texas is raging as the state board of education prepares to take a preliminary vote on a revised set of state science standards. Darwin Day is approaching! And a new website urges policymakers to do right by Texas schoolchildren: Teach Them Science.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR TEXAS SCIENCE STANDARDS?

"The latest round in a long-running battle over how evolution should be taught in Texas schools began in earnest Wednesday as the State Board of Education heard impassioned testimony from scientists and social conservatives on revising the science curriculum," as *The New York Times* (January 22, 2009) reports. The stakes are high: the standards will determine what is taught in Texas's public school science classrooms and the content of the biology textbooks approved for use in the state for the next ten years. And the threat is real: seven members of the fifteen-member board, including its chair, avowed creationist Don McLeroy, are regarded as in favor of attempts to undermine the teaching of evolution in Texas schools. Moreover, as the *Times* observes, "The debate here has far-reaching consequences; Texas is one of the nations biggest

buyers of textbooks, and publishers are reluctant to produce different versions of the same material.”

The old standards for high school biology include a requirement that reads, “The student is expected to analyze, review, and critique scientific explanations, including hypotheses and theories, as to their strengths and weaknesses using scientific evidence and information.” In 2003, the “strengths and weaknesses” language was selectively applied by members of the board attempting to dilute the treatment of evolution in the biology textbooks then under consideration, and so it was clear that the “strengths and weaknesses” language would be a matter of contention when the standards were next revised. The revised standards currently under consideration replace the “strengths and weaknesses” language with “The student is expected to analyze and evaluate scientific explanations using empirical evidence, logical reasoning, and experimental and observational testing” — a revision that was widely praised by scientific, education, and religious freedom groups.

On January 21, 2009, the first day of the board’s January meeting, the board heard testimony about the science standards from dozens of witnesses, including NCSE’s executive director Eugenie C. Scott, who urged the board to heed the advice of the scientific and educational experts who revised the standards and omitted the “strengths and weaknesses” language. The *Times* quoted her as explaining, “The phrase ‘strengths and weaknesses’ has been spread nationally as a slogan to bring creationism in through the back door.” And the *Dallas Morning News* (January 21, 2009) added, “Scott warned the board that if it adopts the requirement, it will lead to textbooks that contain pseudoscience and inaccuracies as publishers try to appease the state and get their books sold in Texas. ‘If you require textbook publishers to include bad science, you’re going to have problems,’ she said, asserting that Texas students will suffer as a result.”

Kevin Fisher, a past president of the Science Teachers Association of Texas, told the *Times* that the attempt to retain the “strengths and weaknesses” language is “an attempt to bring false weaknesses into the classroom in an attempt to get students to reject evolution.” And David M. Hillis, a distinguished professor of biology at the University of Texas, Austin, concurred, adding, “Every single thing they are representing as a weakness is a misrepresentation of science ... These are science skeptics. These are people with religious and political agendas.” Ryan Valentine of the Texas Freedom Network worried about the consequence for Texas’s image: “A misguided crusade to include phony weaknesses in the theory of evolution in our science curriculum will send a message to the rest of the nation that science takes a back seat to politics in Texas,” the *Morning News* reported him as saying.

Also testifying were people, including a representative of the Discovery Institute, who supported the “strengths and weaknesses” language, often betraying the connection between the language and creationism. A teacher quoted by the *Morning News*, for example, said, “As a creationist, I don’t want creationism taught in science classes, but this proposal [to drop the strengths and weaknesses rule] smacks of censorship.” A mechanical engineer quoted by the *Times* said, echoing a rhetorical theme prominent in creationist circles since the Scopes era, “Textbooks today treat it as more than a theory, even though its evidence has been found to be stained with half-truths, deception and hoaxes.” (As NCSE’s Glenn Branch and Louise S. Mead recently wrote, “[William Jennings Bryan’s] position — that it is okay to teach about evolution but only as something conjectural or speculative, as ‘just a theory’ and not as a fact — continues to resonate.”)

On the second day of the board’s meeting, there is expected to be a first vote on whether to adopt the standards, followed by a second vote on the third day, January 23, 2009. After a period for further public comment, a final vote are expected, but not guaranteed, to occur at the board’s March 26-27, 2009, meeting. There may not be any changes in the positions of the board members, however; the *Morning News* observed in its report on the first day of the hearing, “Most State Board of Education members appeared to have their minds made up.” But groups supporting the integrity of science education in Texas — including Teach Them Science, Texas Citizens for Science, the Texas Freedom Network, the 21st Century Science Coalition, the Texas Academy of Science, the Academy of Medicine, Engineering and Science of Texas, the Texas Science Education Leadership Association, and the Science Teachers Association of Texas — are sure to continue to fight.

In addition to the newspaper reports cited above, a variety of on-line sources provided detailed, candid, and often uninhibited running commentary on the proceedings: Texas Citizens for Science’s Steven Schafersman is blogging, and posting photographs, on the Houston Chronicle’s Evo.Sphere blog, the Texas Freedom Network is blogging on its TFN Insider blog, NCSE’s Joshua Rosenau is blogging on his personal blog, Thoughts from Kansas (hosted by ScienceBlogs), and the Houston Press blogged the first day of the meeting. For those wanting to get their information from the horse’s mouth, minutes and audio recordings of the board meeting will be available on the Texas Education Agency’s website. And NCSE will, of course, have a report on the proceedings of the second and third days of the board’s meeting as soon as possible.

For the story in *The New York Times*, visit:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/education/22texas.html>

For the old standards and the proposed standards (both PDF), visit:

<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter112/ch112c.pdf>

http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/Sci_TEKS_9-12_Clean_010509.pdf

For the story in the *Dallas Morning News*, visit:

<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/latestnews/stories/012109dntexsciencecurriculum.192e26c.html>

For Branch and Mead's article (PDF), visit:

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/fr258627q2x3t378/fulltext.pdf>

For the various blog reports, visit:

<http://www.chron.com/commons/readerblogs/evosphere.html>

<http://tfblog.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.scienceblogs.com/tfk/>

http://blogs.houstonpress.com/hairballs/political_animals/

For the Texas Education Agency's minutes and audio recordings pages, visit:

http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/sboe/audio_archived.html

http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/sboe/minutes_archived.html

And for NCSE's previous coverage of events in Texas, visit:

<http://ncseweb.org/news/texas>

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Not in Our Classrooms: Why Intelligent Design Is Wrong for Our Schools

<http://www.ncseweb.org/nioc>

Eugenie C. Scott's *Evolution vs. Creationism*

<http://www.ncseweb.org/evc>

NCSE's work is supported by its members. Join today!

<http://www.ncseweb.org/membership>

Breaking News. Science Ekes Out a Win

Pro-evolution Forces Take an Unexpected Win at the Texas Board of Education

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2009-01-30.htm#win>

<http://www.dallasobserver.com/2009-01-29/news/evolving-battle/>

Give this round to science in the fight over how to teach evolution in Texas schools

By Kimberly Thorpe

Published on January 28, 2009 at 2:08pm

“When you analyze and evaluate something, by definition you are also looking at any strengths and any weaknesses.”

The recent debate about how evolution should be taught in public schools revealed two things about the Texas State Board of Education. First, it showed that the board will listen to its loudest constituents (in this case, the evolutionists). Second, the 15-member board is not, after all, necessarily dominated by right-wing religious fundamentalists.

Every 10 years the board rewrites the science standards for the state's public schools. For the last two decades, the standards have required science teachers to instruct students about the “strengths and weaknesses” of scientific theories. Although the rule did not explicitly mention evolution, critics argued that in practice it targeted Darwin's theory.

Many members of the board are religious fundamentalists and believe that the theory of evolution has significant weaknesses. Although nobody on the board ever suggested that intelligent design—the notion that events in the world are planned and full of purpose, rather than random as evolution suggests—should be taught in schools, the implication was there. The board's chairman, Don McLeroy, has publicly supported teaching students the weaknesses of the theory of evolution, and the state board invited at least one witness to weigh in on the new curriculum standards from the Discovery Institute in Seattle, Washington. According to its Web site, the institute supports “the scientific theory known as intelligent design.”

...

Dr. Ronald Wetherington of Southern Methodist University is one of the six science experts the board invited to give testimony regarding the proposed curriculum standards. He could find no other point in including “strengths and weaknesses” than as a political wedge. In terms of scientific language, the phrase was redundant. “When you analyze and evaluate something, by definition you are also looking at any strengths and any weaknesses,” he says. The phrase, he feared, “allows the school board majority, and at that time it was a majority, to insist that textbook publishers include both weaknesses as well as strengths when they're talking about evolution.” And since publishers don't enjoy

publishing multiple versions of textbooks, what passes in Texas will be passed to the rest of the nation.

And that was “the fear” that Agosto was describing. Agosto, who usually votes with the conservative faction, didn’t do so this time. On Thursday, he—along with the more moderate board members, including the three Dallas-area representatives, Pat Hardy of Fort Worth and Geraldine Miller and Mavis Knight, both from Dallas—voted to strike the word “weaknesses” from the rule. For the first time in a long while, the board had a new majority.

The word strike-out was hailed as a victory for the scientists, but it wasn’t the end of the story. The board passed two smaller-scale amendments that ran against the scientists’ thinking.

McLeroy introduced an amendment that directs science teachers and students to “describe the sufficiency or insufficiency of common ancestry to explain the sudden appearance, stasis and sequential nature of groups in the fossil record,” which passed. And board member Barbara Cargill, from The Woodlands, introduced a series of amendments that added dispute to fossil records. “There are many, many gaps that don’t link species changing and evolving into another species, so we want our students to get all of the science, and we want them to have great, open discussions and learning to respect each other’s opinions,” she told the Houston Chronicle on Friday.

Future Meeting Dates

21 February 2009	11 July 2009
21 March 2009	8 August 2009
18 April 2009	12 September 2009
16 May 2009	10 October 2009
13 June 2009	14 November 2009
	12 December 2009

Sir David Has His Say

For over fifty years David Attenborough has presented science for the British Broadcasting Company (BBC). The Crown has seen fit to tap him with a sword in recognition of his contributions. Others have been not so kind.

Attenborough on evolution

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2009-01-30.htm#David>

<http://www.teletext.co.uk/entertainment/news/1e60f000d4c727a6cfe4ff847a4687de/Attenborough+on+evolution.aspx>

BBC naturalist Sir David Attenborough receives hate mail from Christians saying he will “burn in hell” for not crediting God in his programmes.

The veteran broadcaster was talking to the *Radio Times* about a new documentary series on Charles Darwin to mark the bicentennial of his birth.

Charles Darwin And The Tree Of Life also marks 150 years since publication of *On The Origin Of Species*.

Attenborough has attacked the teaching of creationism in schools as an alternative to evolution.

“It’s like saying that two and two equals four, but if you wish to believe it, it could also be five,” he said.

“Evolution is not a theory; it is a fact, every bit as much as the historical fact that William the Conqueror landed in 1066,” he told the *Radio Times*.

In his turn, Sir David has been so unkind as to remind his critics of a few facts.

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2009-01-30.htm#worms>

<http://www.newscientist.com/blogs/shortsharpscience/2009/01/eye-burrowing-worms-national-t.html>

“They always mean beautiful things like hummingbirds,” he told *Radio Times* magazine. “I always reply by saying that I think of a little child in east Africa with a worm burrowing through his eyeball. The worm cannot live in any other way, except by burrowing through eyeballs.”

I guess the gloves are coming off, then.

Skeptic Ink — by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2009. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.



See also:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2009-01-30.htm#hell>

http://www.theherald.co.uk/news/news/display.var.2484685.0.Creationists_tell_Sir_David_Attenborough_to_burn_in_hell.php

Joyous News In Louisiana

Pardon the sarcasm, if you will.

Creationism to be taught in La. public schools

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2009-01-30.htm#Louisiana>

<http://tigerweekly.com/article/01-28-2009/10156>

By Abby Lunetta

“Evolution is not a science. It’s as much a science as Christianity is. The majority of America is Christian, and we should acknowledge that in school,” said Sam Huff, LSU geography freshman.

OK, that’s just one person’s opinion.

Apparently, lawmakers in Louisiana agree with Huff.

According to local reports, the state’s top school board approved a policy on Jan. 15 to aid in teacher compliance with a new state law concerning the teaching of evolution in Louisiana’s public schools.

The Louisiana Science Education Act, which was overwhelmingly passed by the state legislature last June without serious debate, claims to promote “students’ critical thinking skills and open discussion of scientific theories.”

The Act expressly allows teachers to provide supplemental reading material for their students, outside of state-approved textbooks, for the purpose of critiquing established scientific theories.

Skeptics, these are the good times. What did we ever do for entertainment before the creationists came around?

On the serious side, what the law says is teachers will not get into trouble for teaching ideas contrary to evolution. My legal opinion, and I used to watch a bunch of lawyer shows on TV, is this: Previously, if teachers went off track and started teaching weird stuff that was not in the curriculum, their boss could come and tell them to knock it off. The law now says these teachers can go about their business unless parents object. Then these objections will be addressed on a case by case basis. Meaning: In some schools a lot of creationism will be taught.

Web News To Continue Tribute to Darwin

For the remainder of this year the Web News column will continue to honor the contributions of Charles Darwin by bringing you stories related to modern science related to evolution. We will also highlight the activities of those seeking to substitute superstition and wishful thinking in place of this body of science.



North Texas Skeptics
P.O. Box 111794
Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794

FIRST CLASS

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Application for Membership

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Membership agreement:

Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible and scientific point of view, and while I do not endorse the a priori rejection of paranormal phenomena and pseudoscientific claims, I believe that such claims must be subjected to the fair and systematic testing which rational enquiry demands.

Signature _____ Date _____

The North Texas Skeptics, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794 (972) 306-3187

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