JCATING THE EDUCATORS

Massimo Pigliucci

859 the world got a piece of shocking news: it seems that not only is the
the center of the universe, as Copernicus and Galileo had amply demonstr
that human beings are not the pinnacle of creation after all. This dev
v to our self-esteem (as Freud called it) – the second in three centuries -
Charles Darwin, a quiet Englishman who had made his lifelong activit
nding of the natural variation of living organisms. As is well known
ion of his *On the Origin of Species* caused quite a stir in academic circles
he general public. The first kind of controversy (the scientific one) lasted
ecades: by the turn of the 20th century the theory of descent with modific
win called it), or evolution (as we now refer to it), was as solidly establish
relativity or the theory of gases.
so for the second sort of controversy: while the general public in most Euro
s does not consider the notion that we are closely related to chimps and
rticularly outrageous anymore, a vocal minority in the United States refuse
a on ideological grounds: it's not in the Bible, so it can't be.
v can this bizarre state of affairs persist into the 21st century?
a scientist, this seems as incredible as somebody seriously defending the
the earth is flat (which a few people belonging to the Flat Earth Socie
ia actually do!). Scientists are not in the business of questioning people's
liefs, but they are also paid to teach the best of what we have good reaso
e know, leaving individuals to make decisions on how to reconcile the di
science with their own religious views.

ne Tennessee Darwin Coalition served as inspiration behind the intern
n Day Program. The Darwin Day Program works to encourage the pu
about evolutionary biology and to prompt scientists to get out of their ivo
at least a few hours and talk to the people who, after all, pay their salar
ch grants. Surely this sort of communication between experts and lay peopl
ad idea. Bridging the gap between science and society is what the Darw
am is all about.
st in case you'd like to start your own Darwin Day celebrations, let me t
we did in Tennessee this year.
ne events started on February 11 with a workshop for local junior and high
rs on how to use evolution as an example of critical thinking. Imagine! T
it would be much better for students to learn about the process of scien
ertain conclusions (e.g., that we did evolve from a common ancestor share
tly living chimps) are actually reached instead of just learning facts th
o take on faith.
n February 12 there was a whole array of events, starting with an all-day in
ooth at the student union where faculty and graduate students will answe
bout evolution, and continuing with a documentary festival in which vide
ed by a discussion of the main ideas presented. Darwin Day 2002 in Te
ded with a special lecture by philosopher Elliott Sober (of the Univer
nsin-Madison), who nicely showed why intelligent design theory is actu
at all (see his paper in this anthology.)
ow, you don't have to do all this to have a Darwin Day next year, but ma
e advantage of your local colleges and univerisities - work with the com
ich you are a part.
hile it is astounding to see that the state of science education in this cou
r that people proudly "reject" well established scientific theories simply b
on't fit with their preconceptions, there is a bright side to almost everythi
olution-creation controversy is no exception. After my rude awakening
es of creationism when I moved to Tennessee, I started to study the proble
ts. In so doing I learned quite a bit about why people believe what they b
what shortcomings of science education are contributing to cause the pr
esult has been a better awareness of the situation and a renewed willingne

by attacks on their discipline from as varied sources as the religious right and the academic left-may be finally starting to realize that they have a moral obligation to come to the public and explain what they are doing, why and how. This, as the final words of Casablanca famously went, may be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. The result could be a better informed and critically thinking public, the true guarantors of a democracy… and a civlization. ☞

[About the Author]

Massimo Pigliucci is an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where he teaches ecology and evolutionary biology. He has published 49 technical papers and two books on evolutionary biology: *Phenotypic Evolution* with Carl Schlichting and *Beyond Nature vs. Nurture*. Dr. Pigliucci has received the Oak Ridge National Labs award for excellence in research and the prestigious Dobzhansky Prize from the Society for the Study of Evolution, of which he is now Vice President. Dr. Pigliucci is also widely published within skeptic and freethought journals, and presents lectures and debates throughout the country. A book of his essays entitled *Tales of the Rational: Skeptical Essays About Science and Nature* has been published and his monthly e-column entitled *Rationally Speaking* is hosted on numerous web sites. Massimo Pigliucci is Vice-Chair of the Darwin Day Program.

[Additional Resources]

Darwin Day at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville: http://fp.bio.utk.edu/darwin/

Massimo's Skeptic & Humanist Web: http://fp.bio.utk.edu/skeptic/