

Science losing war over evolution

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Director Randy Olson featured his mother Muffy Olson (above) as well as friends on the Harvard faculty in his film 'Flock of Dodos,' a sometimes humorous exploration of the debate between evolution and intelligent design. (Staff photos Jon Chase/Harvard News Office)

This just in from the front lines of the battle between evolution and intelligent design: evolution is losing. That's the assessment of Randy Olson, a Harvard-trained evolutionary biologist turned filmmaker who explored the debate in a new film, "Flock of Dodos: The Evolution - Intelligent Design Circus," which was screened Monday (Feb. 6) at the Harvard Museum of Natural History.

Featuring Harvard faculty as well as scenes shot within the museum, the 90-minute film strikes a humorous tone as it explores the debate, poking a bit of fun at both intelligent design and the scientific community.

Though Olson is obviously on the side of evolution, he exposes the shortcomings of both sides. He portrays intelligent designers as energetic, likeable people who compensate for their shaky theory's shortcomings through organization, personal appeal, and money. Scientists, on the other hand, squander their factual edge through indifference and poor communication skills.

But Olson said there's something deeper than the surface face-off between those on the front lines. The efforts to teach intelligent design in the schools is backed by media-savvy, well-financed organizations like the Discovery Institute that aren't afraid to hire high-powered public relations firms to advance their cause.

And, though the position of evolution supporters has been upheld by the U.S. courts - most recently last year in the Dover, Penn., case - Olson predicted that the battle isn't over.

"What's going on is not being called 'a culture discussion,' it's being called 'a culture war,'" Olson said in a panel discussion after the screening.

The film is centered on the debate over teaching evolution in the schools of Olson's home state of Kansas and also covers the Dover, Penn., case.

Despite his scientific background, Olson handles intelligent design proponents gently throughout the film, giving them a chance to air their views. He offers some anti-design examples, like the fact that a rabbit's digestive tract is designed such that vegetation breaks down in a portion that comes after the part that absorbs nutrients, forcing rabbits to digest their food twice to get any value from the food. Rabbits do this by eating pellets that they've excreted to pass them through a second time, prompting the film to ask, "Where's the intelligent design in this?"

But rather than offering a detailed explanation of evolution or a point-by-point rebuttal of intelligent design, "Flock of Dodos" probes how it is that, 150 years after Darwin published his theories and 80 years after the Scopes Monkey Trial, a debate over evolution is raging in this country.

Though he concludes that intelligent design is a theory that has stalled at what he calls the "intuition stage," Olson says in "Flock of Dodos" that it still appears to have the upper hand.

The movie includes several shots of the inside of the Harvard Museum of Natural History, most recognizably the whale skeleton hanging from the ceiling, complete with remnant pelvic bones attesting to a time when the whale's ancestors had legs.

The movie also includes several Harvard-trained scientists, as well as faculty members Karel Liem, the Henry Bryant Bigelow Professor of Ichthyology, and James Hanken, professor of biology and director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology.

Olson received his doctorate from Harvard in 1984 and was a professor at the University of New Hampshire from 1988 until 1994, when he left the university shortly after receiving tenure to attend film school at the University of Southern California.

Olson participated in a panel discussion after the film with James McCarthy, Alexander Agassiz Professor of Biological Oceanography, and New York Times science writer Cordelia Dean. The panel was moderated by Douglas Starr, co-director for Boston University's Center for Science and Medical Journalism.

Dean said the debate has remained alive because the scientific community has failed to make the case for evolution to the ordinary person. That is at least partly due to neglect, she said.

"They often see no necessity to do so, and our society as a whole suffers for it," Dean said.

McCarthy said that may be because of the nature of the scientific subculture itself. Scientists are discouraged from drawing too bold conclusions from their research and from not mentioning sometimes multiple caveats on their findings, traits that make it difficult to craft and deliver a clear, persuasive message to the public.

"It's so counter to our training as scientists to give a flip answer or to give an answer without all the caveats," McCarthy said.

Source: Harvard University (By Alvin Powell)

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