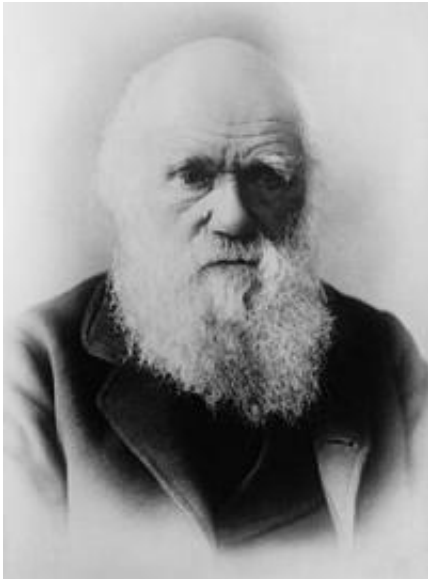


# Darwin Needs A Make-Over: Budget Cuts at Leiden University

February 12 2009, by Mary Anne Simpson

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Charles Darwin. Image: British Archives-public domain

(PhysOrg.com) -- A decision by the Dutch government to introduce "competitiveness" into the criteria for funding university research has in effect obliterated Leiden University's department of evolutionary biology. Ironically, February 12th marks the 200th anniversary of Charles Robert Darwin's birth. He laid the ground work for the study of evolutionary biology in his work, "On the Origin of the Species." Natural selection takes on many forms in the 21st century. Placing a monetary value on worthy scientific work and the race for scarce funding sources creates an artificial selection with significant implications for all species.

Boards, committees and other agencies of government decide on a daily basis the funding worthiness of the species. The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research's (NWO) competitiveness criteria is no different than its counterparts around the world.

The concept of competitiveness when applied to university funding for research utilizes the same criteria the Dutch government uses to allocate funds to all universities. According to Sjoerd Verduyn Lunel, Dean of Natural Sciences at Leiden University, student enrollment and income from competitive grants are factors when allocating funding resources for research. In effect, classical evolutionary biology study has been bypassed by its progeny molecular biology, bio-diversity, conservation and ecology in popularity.

In September, 2008 the Dutch government transferred nearly \$130 million dollars of its budgeted funds for universities to the NWO to divvy up amongst all the universities on a competitive basis. The problem at Leiden University was the inability to offset the unexpected shortfall in funds. Leiden University policy makers elected not to evenly eliminate funding across the board, but instead passed nearly \$2.5 million in cuts to the Institute of Biology. The Institute in turn eliminated the evolutionary biologists, staff and post doctoral students who will be fired on March 1, 2009.

Leiden University's evolutionary biology department has brought suit to prevent the elimination of jobs and funding claiming in part the decision unfairly favored molecular biologists. According to Jacques Van Alphen, a population ecologist who will be terminated from employment in March, "there will be no one left who can teach natural selection." Coincidentally, Professor van Alphen is Chair of the WOTRO panel for Integrated Programmes, a wing of the NWO whose mission it is to provide awards and grants for multi-discipline scientific endeavors. Scientists around the world have rallied in support of the Leiden

evolutionary biology department.

Nature News presented the Leiden University situation in its February 10 on-line publication in an article titled, "Dutch University Slashes Evolution Staff". The article lays out an over view of the funding dilemma. An interesting comment by Fietson Galis runs contrary to the popular belief that theoretical evolutionary biology and animal ecology are unpopular. According to Galis, it was molecular biology that did not fare as well in fellowships. That is the gravamen of the complaint against the Institute of Biology's decision. As with universities world-wide, when it comes to administration, funding, integrating funding sources and deciding how to allocate finite resources, nothing is simple.

Possible Labor Relations Factors:

The Netherlands in recent years has taken measured steps to meet the objectives of the Lisbon Declaration to increase the participation of age 50+ citizens in the workforce and to achieve a competitive knowledge economy by 2010. This Dutch governmental policy may have in some way contributed to the Leiden University decision to ax a department instead of going through the tedious and laborious task of eliminating jobs without running afoul of governmental policy or possibly age based discrimination. Whether the Institute of Biology adhered to its employment policy, tenure rights and properly down-sized the staff is the stuff law suits are made.

In conclusion, maybe the evolutionary biologists should hire a public relations expert or find a good science thesaurus and re-invent good old Darwin by including some micro, bio and eco in their vitae.

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