

Blow to evolution as creationism tightens its grip on US schools

A religious campaign to block the teaching of evolutionary biology is taking an inexorable grip on the US.

Robin McKie, Manchester Guardian science editor, Sunday February 24, 2002

A survey published in Scientific American reveals that the doctrine of creationism - which holds that the origins of humanity and the Earth are recent and divine - is spreading in the world's greatest technological nation at a disturbing rate. More and more states are restricting the teaching of evolution in schools.

The journal says that a startling 45 per cent of Americans now believe God created life some time in the past 10,000 years, despite research that has established the universe as 13 billion years old and that men and women are descended from apelike ancestors.

Even among US Catholics 40 per cent still insist God created human life a few thousand years ago - even though Pope John Paul II reaffirmed his Church's commitment to the theory of evolution in 1996.

'At the time, newspapers in Mississippi wrote that this proved the Pope was senile and should be ignored,' said Amanda Chesworth, head of the anti-creationist Darwin Day group. 'It is very, very scary. Creationism is spreading further and further. It now has missionaries across the world and even has bases in Russia and Turkey.'

In the past, most attempts to block the teaching of evolution ended in failure, the most famous example being the Scopes trial in 1925. It involved the prosecution of John Scopes for teaching Darwin's theory in his class. He was fined \$100, but this was overturned by Tennessee's Supreme Court on a technicality. Yet the state kept its anti-evolution laws on the statute book until 1967.

In 1999 Kansas Board of Education voted to block mention of Darwin in its schools but members were voted out and their anti-evolution policy was reversed.

But creationists have been quietly notching up a series of victories elsewhere. The Scientific American survey by Lawrence Lerner, of California State University, shows that in northern states such as Illinois, Ohio and Wisconsin creationism has taken a powerful grip on education at local level, despite each state's strong liberal tradition. Ohio is considering banning evolution teaching, and even New York and Massachusetts are turning against evolution.

'Creationists use some very effective tactics,' said Chesworth. 'They target small towns and get supporters on important local organisations, in particular boards of education. Then they launch campaigns to demand equal time for their views beside those of evolution. Voters get confused. They don't understand that creationism is a doctrine and is very different from scientific theory. Equating one with the other is simply false. One is science, the other is religious belief.'

Another recent technique has been to promote the argument of 'intelligent design'. Yes, the universe may be very old, say proponents, but everywhere you look you can see clear evidence of the handiwork of a creator. Even bananas are given as evidence of this: convenient for handling, with a tab for wrapper-removal, a pleasing taste, and an obvious skin-blackening sell-by-date mechanism. By contrast, most scientists believe the cosmos is random and unpredictable.

Scientific American believes that the content of textbooks and lesson plans in schools is already being affected by creationism.

Cheswell agrees. 'Our nation went from the Earth to the Moon a few years ago, and discovered these worlds date back billions of years. Now it is sticking its head in the sand, claiming the whole lot was made in a flash a few millennia ago by one entity. They even argue that dinosaurs and humans coexisted, like they do in The Flintstones . That's not healthy.'