

Biologists snub 'kangaroo court' for Darwin

Geoff Brumfiel, Washington

Kansas biologists are set to boycott upcoming board of education hearings on the future of science teaching in the state.

The researchers contend that the hearings are being set up to serve as a thinly veiled showcase for 'intelligent design' — the theory that a god shaped the course of evolution.

Over six days in early May, the board hopes to hear arguments from proponents of intelligent design and scientists about whether there is evidence for the intervention of a deity in the process of evolution. "We view this hearing as an opportunity to educate the committee and the public," says Steve Abrams, a veterinarian in Arkansas City and chairman of the board of education. The hearings are part of a review of the state's science curriculum.

But so far, no evolutionary biologists have agreed to participate in the hearings. They say that the board has already decided to include language that is friendly to intelligent design in the new science standards. "We will not participate in their kangaroo

court," says Harry McDonald, president of Kansas Citizens for Science. "We will lose and the creationists will win if we lend our credibility to these hearings," he adds.

Kansas Citizens for Science is a group of pro-evolution researchers and science teachers that successfully opposed a 1999 drive to drop the teaching of evolution in the state (see *Nature* **400**, 701; 1999). The attempt outraged researchers and embarrassed state officials; in 2001 a newly elected school board voted to reaffirm the requirement to teach Darwin's theory.

But last November, conservatives regained a majority on the board, and are again considering revisions to the way evolution is taught. This time, however, the changes are more subtle. The revised plans were drawn up by a minority group on a 25-member panel that was appointed last June to write a science curriculum for Kansas.

The plan will introduce a definition of science that includes the possibility of the supernatural, and will point out several "weaknesses" of macroevolutionary theory,

such as gaps in the fossil record, says John Calvert, managing director of the Intelligent Design Network based in Shawnee, Kansas. "The idea is simply to open up the discussion of evolution," he says.

Abrams says the purpose of the hearings is to help educate board members about the proposed changes. But McDonald maintains that board members are not interested in hearing researchers' opinions. "They're just doing this as a political smokescreen," he says.

The Kansas case comes amid a wave of efforts by religious conservatives to limit the teaching of evolution nationwide. In October last year a school board in Dover, Pennsylvania, passed a policy requiring teachers to describe evolution as "not a fact". Other states, such as Alabama, are now revising their science standards to diminish the role of evolution.

McDonald says that Kansas Citizens for Science is planning a response to the May hearings. The board of education will decide on a final set of standards in June. ■

Viennese lab renovations stall as cash goes unspent

Quirin Schiermeier, Vienna

One of Europe's few institutes for the study of birds and animal behaviour is being hamstrung, some members of its board complain, as hundreds of thousands of euros meant for its refurbishment are going unspent.

Plans to bring the Konrad Lorenz Institute of Ethology in Vienna into the twenty-first century have been around for five years. But critics say that promised, and much-needed, investment in new staff, facilities and research has stagnated since 2002, when Dustin Penn, a behavioural biologist formerly at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, took over as director.

Penn promised the Austrian Academy of Sciences, which runs the institute, that he would introduce cutting-edge genetic research, while building on traditional strengths such as ornithology.

But members of the institute's board say they have become increasingly concerned about the slow pace of change. *Nature* has seen a copy of the annual report, which shows that in the past two years Penn has returned around half of the institute's €1.3 million (US\$1.7 million) annual budget unspent. But *Nature* was unable to confirm these numbers with the

academy, which, even though its work is funded by the taxpayer, says these records are confidential.

Critics claim that Penn has spent most of his time managing a \$4-million project to investigate the genetic basis of human odour, funded by the US Defense Advanced Research Project Agency. They add that this project, carried out mainly in the United States and Britain, leaves Penn little time for the institute.

"If he is overstretched, the best solution would be for him to let someone else manage the institute," says board member John Dittami, head of the ethology department at the University of Vienna.

Penn denies that his workload is

unmanageable. "I spend a tremendous amount of my time running the Konrad Lorenz institute, supervising postdocs and negotiating with the academy," he says. "I am working overtime to get everything done."

But progress at the institute has stalled. Some of the draughty, low-ceilinged wooden buildings — a hangover from the Second World War barracks from which the institute was formed — do not meet modern research requirements. Some facilities are in desperate need of repair, including a leaking diving tank used to study fish. And although a small genetics lab has been installed, along with a temporary facility for housing mice, the planned expansion of genetics research has not yet come to fruition.

Penn blames unforeseen architectural problems and lack of permission from the Viennese planning authorities for the delay. "I have budgeted money for new equipment, but we couldn't buy everything that we planned simply because there's nowhere we could put it," he says.

The institute's board is set to meet this autumn to discuss the problems. But neither the board nor the academy would reveal to *Nature* exactly when an external review will take place. Georg Stingl, the academy secretary in charge of mathematics and natural sciences, says the evaluation might be "this or next year". ■

Additional reporting by Alison Abbott.



Cornered: critics say lab head Dustin Penn is overstretched.