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Evolutionist row makes museum ditch donation

WASHINGTON DC

Is one of Washington's most prestigious museums promoting intelligent design by screening a film that some scientists claim is anti-evolution? The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History has returned a \$16,000 donation it had accepted from a think-tank that promotes the philosophy, but it still plans to allow the group to screen its controversial movie.

The trouble began in April, when Smithsonian officials rented an auditorium to the Seattle-based Discovery Institute. The institute is a major centre of the intelligent-design movement, which holds that an intelligent creator, and not natural selection, shaped life on Earth.

Evolution advocates were shocked to receive invitations from the Discovery Institute that claimed the 23 June event was co-sponsored by the museum's director. "It looked as though the Smithsonian was

supporting intelligent design," says Eugenie Scott, head of the National Center for Science Education in Oakland, California, which works to improve the teaching of evolution.

According to spokesman Randall Kremer, the museum regularly accepts donations for use of the auditorium, and staff were unaware of the institute's philosophy. "It was treated as a routine request," he says.

"The Smithsonian was duped," adds Lawrence Krauss, a theoretical physicist at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, who lectures on evolution.

Discovery Institute staff deny any wrongdoing. "We actually followed the invitation template that the Smithsonian provided for us," says Jay Richards, a senior fellow with the institute.

Nevertheless, after dozens of calls and e-mails from researchers and the public, the museum decided last week to return the donation and issue a statement disavowing the event. "We are not in any way changing

the foundation of research here," says Kremer. However, the museum will honour its contract and allow the Discovery Institute to show *The Privileged Planet: The Search for Purpose in the Universe*.

Richards adds that the film does not deal directly with intelligent design or biological evolution. It is based on a book he co-authored with Guillermo Gonzalez, an astronomer at Iowa State University, which argues that Earth is uniquely and improbably suited for the appearance of life.

Scott says she is pleased by the swift steps the museum has taken. But not everyone is satisfied. "I personally don't think they should show the film," says Peter Folger, director of outreach for the American Geophysical Union in Washington DC, adding that the screening could give the institute scientific credibility.

The museum is reviewing its special-events policy to avoid confusion in future. ■
Geoff Brumfiel