AZA Position Statement on Evolution: Zoos & Aquariums as Science-based Institutions

Approved by the AZA Board of Directors – March 2006

AZA zoos and aquariums are science-based institutions engaged in formal and informal science education. They serve as important public resources for schools, universities, and other educational organizations. As such, AZA zoos and aquariums reference the theory of evolution in exhibits and programs. Current scientific evidence(1) as well as binding legal decisions(2) supports the theory of evolution as valid science. Portraying alternative views not subject to scientific inquiry and testing as valid science is inconsistent with the important science education role AZA zoos and aquariums play in their communities.

Statement Rationale
Because of AZA’s increasing focus on issues management in support of members, we have developed a Position Statement on Evolution. AZA feels strongly that as a representative of science-based institutions it’s important for the Association to make a statement in support of science. It’s also the duty of the Association to provide specific support to members who may need resources to support their stance on behalf of science. This statement is in no way a mandate on program content, but available for institutions to utilize as a resource.

Additional Message Points
Use of various artistic and cultural portrayals of animals by zoos and aquariums intends to validate the special connection between humans and animals and how human societies have valued and even revered animals down through the ages. Zoos and aquariums do not equate these presentations with advocacy for the associated religious beliefs of human societies.

AZA recognizes the collective power of all of our efforts to conserve the incredible diversity of life on Earth. AZA’s guiding vision remains: to create a world where all people, regardless of their personal beliefs, respect, value and conserve animals and nature.

References

   Freiler v. Tangipahoa Board of Education, No. 94-3577 (E.D. La. 1997)

Court Decision Summaries
1. In 1982, in McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education, a federal court held that a "balanced treatment" statute violated the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution. The Arkansas statute required public schools to give balanced treatment to "creation-science" and "evolution-science". In a decision that gave a detailed definition of the term "science", the court declared that "creation science" is not
in fact a science. The court also found that the statute did not have a secular purpose, noting that the statute used language peculiar to creationist literature in emphasizing origins of life as an aspect of the theory of evolution. While the subject of life's origins is within the province of biology, the scientific community does not consider the subject as part of evolutionary theory, which assumes the existence of life and is directed to an explanation of how life evolved after it originated. The theory of evolution does not presuppose either the absence or the presence of a creator.

2. In 1987, in Edwards v. Aguillard, the U.S. Supreme Court held unconstitutional Louisiana's "Creationism Act". This statute prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools, except when it was accompanied by instruction in "creation science". The Court found that, by advancing the religious belief that a supernatural being created humankind, which is embraced by the term creation science, the act impermissibly endorses religion. In addition, the Court found that the provision of a comprehensive science education is undermined when it is forbidden to teach evolution except when creation science is also taught.

3. In 1997, in Freiler v. Tangipahoa Parish Board of Education, the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana rejected a policy requiring teachers to read aloud a disclaimer whenever they taught about evolution, ostensibly to promote "critical thinking". Noting that the policy singled out the theory of evolution for attention, that the only "concept" from which students were not to be "dissuaded" was "the Biblical concept of Creation", and that students were already encouraged to engage in critical thinking, the Court wrote that, "In mandating this disclaimer, the School Board is endorsing religion by disclaiming the teaching of evolution in such a manner as to convey the message that evolution is a religious viewpoint that runs counter to ... other religious views". Besides addressing disclaimer policies, the decision is noteworthy for recognizing that curriculum proposals for "intelligent design" are equivalent to proposals for teaching "creation science". (Freiler v Tangipahoa Board of Education, No. 94-3577 (E.D. La. Aug. 8, 1997). On August 13, 1999, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the decision; on June 19, 2000, the Supreme Court declined to hear the School Board's appeal, thus letting the lower court's decision stand.

4. In 2005, Kitzmiller, et al. v. Dover Area School District, et al., was the first direct challenge brought in United States federal courts against a public school district that required the presentation of "Intelligent Design" as an alternative to evolution as an "explanation of the origin of life". The plaintiffs successfully argued that intelligent design is a form of creationism, and that the school board policy thus violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Eleven parents of students in the school district in Dover, Pennsylvania, near Harrisburg, sued the Dover Area School District over a statement that the school board required to be read aloud in ninth-grade science classes when evolution was taught. On December 20, 2005 Judge Jones issued his 139-page findings of fact and decision, ruling that the Dover mandate was unconstitutional, and barred intelligent design from being taught in public school science classrooms. The current Dover school board president stated that the board does not intend to appeal the ruling.