



Out of the Mainstream: Heated Discussions and Strong Opinions

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At the 2007 Annual Meeting of the GSA there was a social and forum, "Seds and Suds," organized by John Holbrook and sponsored by SEPM, the GSA-Sedimentary Geology division, and NCED (the National Center for Earth-surface Dynamics). As described in his summary (Holbrook, 2008), the "discussion proved to be heated at times, reflecting strong and varied opinions." What is not mentioned is what those opinions were, or why they were held so strongly. You had to be there!

Later at the same conference, the Paleontological Society and the SGP division of NSF held one of their annual "town hall" meetings on the state of funding of paleontology. This meeting was accompanied by the release of the document *Future Research Directions in Paleontology* (available at: <http://paleosoc.org/FRDP-Brochure.pdf>). This discussion was also heated and strong and varied opinions were again expressed. Once more, if you did not attend, you would be unaware of the content of these animated debates.

In both cases, the conflicts did not focus on topics such as techniques for sequence stratigraphic analysis, causes of the Permo-Triassic extinction, or timing of the Cambrian explosion. Instead, they concentrated on the bread-and-butter issues of jobs, research funding, and student training.

The reality is that paleontology is both a science and a profession. These two aspects of the field are not divorced from each other. Both within paleontology, and within the larger context of earth and biological sciences, there is an interplay between the assessment of what constitutes new and interesting science and what gets funded. We all recognize that the ideal that only the best sci-

ence gets support is often not realized. Funding limitations, personal biases, and (gasp!) politics all play a role.

We hold direct and indirect conversations about the science of paleontology, frequently with the clash of strongly held beliefs and concepts, in journal articles, meeting presentations, workshop discussions, and the ephemeral messages of e-mail. The profession of paleontology, on the other hand, is usually only discussed in venues such as those discussed above or in private conversations with colleagues in more informal settings. Published forums such as *Matters of the Record* in *Paleobiology* and *Spotlight* in *PALAIOS* rarely feature essays that focus on the "business" of paleontology (e.g. Maples 2005).

As the new Editorials Editor of PE, a key goal of mine will be to publish provocative, exciting commentaries that will get people talking and writing back (we do have a letters section). I am especially looking for frank and creative essays on the profession of paleontology, from a wide range of sectors within the community. I want strong opinions that start heated (but polite) discussions! When it becomes possible, I hope these discussions can take place electronically in "real time," rather than waiting for the publication of the next issue. This new approach to our commentaries section starts off in this issue with an exciting essay by Carrie Schweitzer on the status and future of systematics in invertebrate paleontology.

Finally, all of my future contributions will be written under the heading Out of the Mainstream. The title is inspired by a Sidney Harris cartoon, in which two scientists are examining equations on a blackboard concluding with "Zap ... Bang ... Boing!" One of the scientists informs his colleague

that "It may be science, but it's not mainstream science." This may be an apt description of my own career; it is also a call for innovative thinking about where our field is headed.

REFERENCES

- Holbrook, J. 2008. 2007 GSA Seds and Suds icebreaker and forum: a popular and lively event. *The Sedimentary Record*, 6(1): 14.
- Maples, C. G. 2005. Collections, data, and metadata - Time to fish or cut bait! *PALAIOS*, 20(3):211-212.