

Parallel Session: 25 Proposals and initiatives for "public dialogue"

**DARWIN CENTRE LIVE – USING LIVE WEBCASTS TO CREATE
DIALOGUE BETWEEN NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM SCIENTISTS
AND THE PUBLIC**

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Abstract

Darwin Centre Live is a daily public programme at London's Natural History Museum. Together with trained science communicators, Museum scientists openly discuss their work with Museum visitors and online audiences. The aim is to encourage dialogue between scientists and the public about current science issues and opens up public access to Museum science and the national collections. The programme uses new multimedia technology to broadcast live to the Web and events are archived on the Museum's website. Darwin Centre Live is part of the Natural History Museum's latest development, the Darwin Centre, which houses 22 million zoology specimens and provides working areas for the Museum's zoology scientists.

Key words: scientists, dialogue, webcast

Text

The Darwin Centre

The Darwin Centre is the newest building at London's Natural History Museum. Opened in September 2002, the centre was completed at a cost of over 20 million pounds. Initially it was designed as a collection and research facility to replace the outdated 'Spirit Building', housing 22 million of the Museum's zoology collections and providing laboratory and working areas for the Museum's zoology division. In its final form, the Darwin Centre also features a public floor and a public "offer" consisting of daily behind-the-scenes tours, displays of some of the Museum's historical material, a suite of information touchscreen kiosks through which Museum visitors can find out about Museum's collections and research, and Darwin Centre Live – a public programme featuring the Museum scientists themselves.

The aims of the Darwin Centre's public offer are:-

To provoke a sense of wonder at the scale, diversity and nature of the life science collections

To give visitors an understanding of the cultural and scientific importance of all the collections, including the current and future value in the UK and world-wide

To show that the collections are actively conserved, curated and managed, used and added to.

To show how museum scientists undertake research, using the collections, to investigate specific issues relating to the natural world.

To give insight into the type, scale and relevance of the research projects the Museum is undertaking

Darwin Centre Live

The public programme is a daily series of events in which Museum scientists discuss their work with the public.

Within the broader context of our Public Offer aims, the programme aims are to:-

Showcase Museum science

Provide Museum scientists with opportunities to disseminate their work beyond their peer group.

Demonstrate the daily use and active conservation of Life and Earth Sciences collections and other Museum archived materials

Promote live and on-line communication between scientists and their publics

Embrace themes of temporary relevance

Be intellectually rewarding, stimulating and scientifically credible

Darwin Centre Live is a mixture of daily 30 minutes sessions (12.00 and 14.30) and longer, monthly evening events, developed between a trained Science Communicator and one or more of the Museum's 350 scientists. The Science Communicator hosts each session to ensure clarity of content and facilitate dialogue between scientists and audience members.

All events are recorded and archived on the Museum's website www.nhm.ac.uk/darwincentre/live. Currently 3-5 events per week are webcast live.

Dialogue

The emphasis in Darwin Centre Live is on discussion and dialogue rather than presentation. In order to achieve dialogue, we aim to ensure that:-

Museum scientists and members of the public can have a conversation with one another about science and science issues in which they are interested

Everyone is seen as equal. No one at these events is seen as an expert, rather the participants are seen as a mix of different types of people with different experiences that they can bring to bear on the discussion

All participants feel comfortable with sharing their own experiences, thoughts and opinions

Everyone feels their own contributions to the discussion are as valuable as anyone else's.

Everyone gains something from the experience whether it is new factual knowledge or enlightenment about the thoughts and opinions of others

Are we achieving dialogue?

After running for 18 months, we have found that the evening events are much more successful at achieving dialogue than our day-time events. This is for two main reasons. The first is that the majority of our day-time audiences are made up of 'drop-in' visitors who come into the Darwin Centre as part of their visit to the Natural History Museum. They may not have come specifically to participate in that day's Darwin Centre Live discussion and, while they are content to sit back and listen to the event, they may feel less prepared to participate. Secondly, our 30 minute day-time slots have less capacity for in-depth conversation.

Evening events, in contrast, allow for in-depth discussions with lots of dialogue. Topics for recent events include bio-prospecting, colonising Mars, the future of Antarctica and the possibility of a future apocalypse. Rather than 'drop-in' visitors, our evening audiences consist of directed, purposeful visitors who are coming because they have an interest in the discussion topic. Often people come with friends as a social occasion. We therefore try to retain this informal feel, providing wine and refreshments and generally making visitors feel comfortable in the space and among the audience. This helps engender a lively conversational feel.

Overall

Overall the visitor's experiences of Darwin Centre Live has been positive. In preliminary evaluation studies, 88% of respondents thought that the Darwin Centre offers something different from the Museum's usual exhibitions and 74% felt they had learned something new about the Museum during their visit.

Although the day-time sessions are less successful at creating true dialogue, they are a valuable tool in communicating Museum science and people have responded positively to the opportunity to meet scientists/experts in a conversational setting.

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