

News

Biology Week

Mark Downs (CEO, Society of Biology)

Biology is exciting. Who could think otherwise? It holds potential solutions to many global challenges, from tackling disease to increasing agricultural productivity, and raises ethical challenges that society as a whole must tackle. When integrated with the other sciences, maths, engineering and technology, the impact is even greater. As Biochemical Society members know better than most, the life sciences are entering new territory. Synthetic biology and personalized medicine are just two of the research areas we will be hearing more about. With such accolades, biology must surely have a bright future?

I am sure that individual members and member organizations of the Society of Biology can all sign up to that. We all work in the sector and can see the extraordinary contribution of biology through history and its even greater untapped potential for the future. The only problem is that most people are not biologists and, as our MORI poll 3 years ago showed, many just think of biology as a subject they vaguely remember from school involving the dissection of frogs. To overcome these misconceptions, we need to engage with the public and work alongside schools and career advisors. Most member organizations of the Society of Biology are other specialist biology-based charities with a subdiscipline focus and already have public outreach and education objections, undertaking some really excellent projects either individually or in partnership with sister societies. But, historically, there has not been a single focus for all of biology to try to raise public awareness. We have been trying to help that by facilitating multi-society events bringing disparate resources together under one 'biology banner', but it is clear there is much more that could be achieved. The UK's first ever Biology Week (13–19 October 2012) was intended to provide a national focus for the whole bioscience sector. We hope that it will become an annual event and grow in reputation and impact.

Over 40 events took place across the country and the media were keen to get behind us covering events on BBC1 Breakfast, BBC Radio 1, local radio and newspapers, BBC online and the broadsheets.

Biology Week was quite literally given a flying start with the launch of the flying ant survey in July to promote the week ahead of time and to try to engage with new people, asking them to report sightings of

flying ants which traditionally have been thought to fly on a single day. We were aiming for 1000 respondents to provide rich data to interpret in collaboration with Professor Adam Hart from the University of Gloucestershire alongside a plan to announce the result during Biology Week. We were overwhelmed with the response



Imran Khan (Director CaSE) and Chi Onwuhra MP (Junior Shadow minister for BIS)



John Stageman OBE (BBSRC Council), Mark Downs (CEO Society of Biology) and Matt Goode (Head of External Relations at the BBSRC)



The Biology Week launch event in the House of Commons

from nearly 6500 people, helped, again, by major media coverage. The data have shown that there were two 'flying ant days' rather than one and is set to lead to academic publications as a great example of 'citizen science' linking into the research needs of academia. We will certainly be repeating the survey in 2013!

There was similar enthusiasm for our debate on biodiversity, 'Should we save the panda?' It was co-hosted with the Linnean Society in a full auditorium and overflow room with video link. The panda won the day, but a wider ballot carried out over several days, and announced at the week's formal launch in the House of Commons, saw a tie between the giant panda and the spoonbill. Andrew Miller MP, chair of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, together with Dr Julian Huppert MP and Stephen Metcalfe MP, hosted this lively BBSRC-sponsored event with wide attendance from the science community and both Houses. I was delighted to be able to promote the value of biology to this important audience and to be able to present four of our first Registered Science Technicians and Registered Scientists with their certificates, part of a new Science Council-led professional recognition system available to our individual members and individuals within our member organizations.

In another first, the Royal Veterinary College opened its doors to the public for a Biology Week

event including the opportunity to attend a dissection, learn about epilepsy and other research, and view the impressive anatomical library/museum. Importantly for the Society, this was not just about centrally organized events; however, we were delighted to see so many member organizations and individual members organizing their own events around the country, including our regional branch network where more than one Nobel Laureate gave their time to help us promote biology.

A fitting conclusion to the Week was a successful attempt to break the world record for the largest number of people carrying out an experiment at the same time, ably supported by Professor Bruce Hood and his work on memory. Over 50 locations took part involving more than 1500 participants with an independent witness at each site to comply with Guinness World Records requirements and support material available on the wonders of the brain readily available. BBC Radio 1 joined in, and many thousands more people around the UK were able to take part helping to move us forward towards the aim of promoting biology in all its forms to the public.

We are already starting to plan Biology Week 2013 and hope to make it bigger and better. Please do get involved. To read more, visit www.societyofbiology.org/biologyweek ■