Axeing of website article sparks row at Max Planck

Alison Abbott, Munich
The Max Planck Institute for Plant Breeding Research in Cologne has removed the detailed description of ‘intelligent design’ from its website, following complaints from scientists that it was inconsistent with the laboratory’s scientific mission.

The article, which was posted by Wolf-Ekkehard Lönnig, a theorist at the institute, discusses the idea that an intelligent force must be responsible for the origin of the Universe and for the diversity of life forms. Known as intelligent design, this theory rejects natural selection, and has been portrayed by its opponents as a ‘front’ for creationism (see Nature 416, 250; 2002).

Earlier this month, Peter Gruss, president of the Max Planck Society, asked the four directors of the Cologne institute to provide a scientific justification for Lönnig’s pages. Lönnig posted the material five years ago, and the site has since received over 35,000 hits. A disclaimer identifying the article as a personal opinion was added in 2001, following earlier complaints.

"Only scientific issues should be discussed on a Max Planck site," says Gruss. And last week, Lönnig’s pages were removed from the institute’s site, pending a directors’ meeting on 28 April to determine their fate.

Ulrich Kutschera, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Kassel, has campaigned against the presence of the material on an official Max Planck website, branding it “pseudoscience”. “It is fine as a personal opinion expressed on a personal website, but not on the official site of a scientific organization of international status,” he says.

Many evolutionary biologists share Kutschera’s concerns: Axel Meyer of the University of Constance, for example, says that he was “shocked” by the contents of the pages. But others, such as Diethard Tautz at the University of Cologne and Svante Pääbo at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, are more circumspect, saying that independent opinions should be permitted. Tautz, however, says it might be more appropriate for such opinions to be aired at “an institute of philosophy” than at the Max Planck.

Lönnig is displeased by the removal of his discussion. “No one is happy when someone switches off the information flow of what he thinks is right,” he says. And Heinz Saedler, one of the institute’s directors, who has supported Lönnig and published jointly with him, says that although he doesn’t believe in intelligent design himself, he enjoys discussing it with Lönnig.

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