

bioFocus

Mark Downs talks about the UK's first ever 'Biology Week'



The Society of Biology is a single unified voice for biology:

- advising Government and influencing policy.
- advancing education and professional development.
- supporting our members.
- engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences.

For further information visit:

www.societyofbiology.org

Biology is exciting. Who could think otherwise? It holds potential solutions to many global challenges from climate change or food security to disease prevention and provides the evidence and understanding for many decisions we take individually and at a societal level. When integrated with the other sciences, maths, engineering and technology the impact is even greater. As SfAM members know better than most, at the smallest level of life, organisms can help make drugs, neutralise waste, create energy sources and "manufacture" raw materials. With such accolades biology must surely have a bright future?

I am sure individual members and member organisations 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 three 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 organisations of the Society of Biology are other specialist biology based charities with a sub-discipline 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 all of the bioscience sector. We hope it will become an annual event and grow in reputation and impact.

Over forty events took place across the country and the media were keen to get behind us covering events on BBC 1 breakfast, BBC radio 1, local radio, BBC on-line 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. We wanted 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 from nearly 6500 people helped, again, by major media coverage. The data has 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 Spoon-billed Sandpiper! 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 organisations.

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 organised events however, we were delighted to see so many member organisations and individual members organising 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 *Biology Week* was a successful attempt to break the world record for the most 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 1,500 participants with an independent witness at each site to comply with *Guinness Book of Records* requirements and support material available on the wonders of the brain readily available. 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 <http://www.societyofbiology.org/biologyweek>.



Dr Mark Downs, PhD, FSB
Chief Executive, Society of Biology