

## Latin American Palaeontology Conference Review

Aracaju, a city in the north east of Brazil, was the setting for the combined meetings of the 19<sup>o</sup> *Congresso Brasileiro de Paleontologia* and 6<sup>o</sup> *Congresso Latino-Americano de Paleontologia* held at the *Resort and Convention Centre, Parque dos Coqueiros*, in August 2005. The Centre is right next to Atalaia beach, a long stretch of tropical Atlantic coastline dotted with oil platforms in the distance. The national oil company, Petrobras, was the major sponsor of the conference.

For months I had been following the development of the conference from Australia via a lively and engaging website that promised "A new look for Palaeontology". It was quite unlike any other scientific meeting I had previously attended. The conference delivered what the web site promised, and more, thanks to the creative energies of the organisers Fernanda Torello de Mello and Luiz Henrique Cruz de Mello under the guidance of the congress President, Maria Zucon, a great team from the small Palaeontology Laboratory at the Universidade Federal de Sergipe.

The scientific content was delivered in three modes interspersed with many enjoyable social functions. There was a program of workshops (short courses) starting each morning at 7:00 am. Topics included taphonomy, invertebrate marine palaeobiogeography, palaeobotany and palynology and ancient climates, biostratigraphy and palaeoecology and, in line with the conference theme, one on "Paleoarte" focussing on the reconstruction of extinct animals. The short courses were seen as way to refresh current knowledge about a topic and were well attended.

The main conference sessions involving keynote speakers convened mid morning and mid afternoon. Topics included palaeontology and education, museums and curatorship, the timing of the opening of the Atlantic Ocean from marine sequences, taphonomy, integrating Late Quaternary palynological and vertebrate palaeontology data sets, the development of palaeobiogeographic concepts and extinction events. At each one, international speakers shared the platform with South American scientists, educators and museum professionals. All of them spoke strongly and provoked lively and spirited dialogue and debate with the audience. The session on the Late Quaternary dealt with climate change. It was a hot topic and attracted some of the elder statesmen of the conservation movement in Brazil to the audience. In South America the relevance of palaeontology to issues of conservation biology seems much clearer than in other parts of the world.

The third mode, and perhaps the one that gave the most insight into the vitality of South American palaeontology, was a series of parallel sessions. It was a revelation not just because of the diversity of topics covered but the youthfulness and enthusiasm of many of the presenters. The technical sessions on palaeontological education were something that usually doesn't feature in scientific meetings, but it is obviously crucial to the future of the science.

A committed band of young people are interested in making a difference by introducing palaeontology into the school system in different ways. They are a mixture of university and museum workers who believe that the education system in Brazil (and elsewhere for that matter) would be much better served if palaeontology was actually a compulsory core subject in high school. They argue this would give

the next generation a capacity for greater insights into issues of biodiversity and conservation than can be done through a curriculum focussed on biology and geography.

The papers that were presented in this technical session consisted of both arguments seeking change in the education system and greater palaeontological opportunities for all those who undertake training as science teachers. There were also outlines of some innovative programs that many of them have undertaken often without funding support. Programs have been instigated for young school children to develop an understanding of deep time through art installations at their local schools. There was a program to bring palaeontological experiences and information to deaf people. Another one covered the development of inventive ways to teach children about palaeobiogeographic concepts using maps and model animals. There was a lot of general enthusiasm for palaeontology to stop being an elite science closeted in ivory towers and reach out to make connections throughout society.

Unlike many scientific meetings, Art was a theme that was manifest throughout. There was a small but interesting art show on palaeontology that attracted a lot of attention. I had only seen this done on one previous occasion, the First International Palaeontological Congress in 2002, but this time delegates voted for their favourite work. There was a delightful presentation from Guiseppe Leonardi who took to the whiteboard and mapped out the relationships between the major families of dinosaurs in South America complete with little cartoons of some of their representatives. He taught using these methods extensively during his career and many of the delegates nostalgically enjoyed his "pre-powerpoint" educational style. There were also caricatures of all the conference *convidados* and *palastrantes* drawn according to the fossil group they studied. These were projected onto a screen to the great amusement of all at the conference dinner.

Palaeontologists are divided by speciality. Here, however, was a combined meeting of all palaeontologists that seems to provide a greater sense of community for South American scientists. It is very refreshing to attend a meeting with such a strong focus on education and the part that palaeontology can play in school curricula. The emphasis on museums and collections is also not strongly represented in other meetings. At the close of the conference the floor was opened to any delegate who wished to speak on any aspect of the conference, the Society and the future direction of the science. There was praise for the organisers and a general consensus that the conference theme "A new look for Palaeontology" had been addressed with flair, vision and creativity.

"A new look for Palaeontology", it is exactly what the science needs to survive and flourish in the new century! Congratulations to our South American colleagues, the global palaeontological community can learn a lot from your achievements.

Andrew Simpson

Division of Environmental and Life Science  
Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia