



Photo Credit: Sophie Warny/Louisiana State Museum of Natural Science

Alaskan native Richard Glenn, standing, and other POLAR-PALOOZA speakers present stories about the polar regions to a packed house hosted by the Louisiana State Museum of Natural Science in Baton Rouge in November. The science road show will be back on tour in 2008.

Science hits the road

POLAR-PALOOZA brings polar research and issues to the public with traveling show

By Peter Rejcek, *Antarctic Sun* Editor

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In 1957, when Charles Bentley and a handful of other adventurous scientists set out on an expedition across West Antarctica in tracked vehicles to make the first measurements of the ice sheet, few in the general public were probably aware of the feat.

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POLAR-PALOOZA 

Fifty years later, the polar regions and those who have devoted their careers to studying them are stars in their own traveling road show, POLAR-PALOOZA. A public education and outreach initiative supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and NASA, POLAR-PALOOZA is something of a "scientific circus," in the words of one of its organizers, Geoff Haines-Stiles.

"It's more of a performance than a lecture," Haines-Stiles explains. The show includes guest speakers, high-definition video clips of researchers in the field, and the use of authentic artifacts, such as a 3,000-year-old ice core, on loan from the National Ice Core Laboratory in Lakewood, Colo.

It's the sort of public relations extravaganza that didn't exist five decades ago during the International Geophysical Year (IGY), a multinational scientific blitz across the frontiers of Earth and space that eventually led to the U.S. Antarctic Program.

“There was no particular effort to reach the public at all,” says Bentley, an emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the principal investigator for Ice Coring and Drilling Services at the university’s Space Science and Engineering Center.

“Furthermore, we didn’t really understand back 50 years ago the connections between the polar regions and the rest of the world,” adds Bentley, 78, who will return to Antarctica in January for a deep ice core project in West Antarctica — where POLAR-PALOOZA hopes to capture him on camera for a podcast.

“[The polar regions] seemed isolated and remote, and of interest as part of the Earth; but it took quite a while to learn how closely related they are to the rest of the world,” Bentley says.

That’s one of the overriding messages of POLAR-PALOOZA, which just wrapped up a six-city tour of presentations and workshops in 2007.

“We find that a significant number of researchers are really excited to have a chance to share their science with large public audiences,” Haines-Stiles says. “They certainly recognize that NSF has made ‘broader impact’ a criterion of success for funding, but I think they’re just as interested in sharing their results, the curiosity they’ve had about such exotic and dramatic locations.”

And the public is responding, according to Haines-Stiles. “Teachers in our K to 12 workshops really love having the chance to meet directly with the researchers who are doing such interesting work,” he says.

At the Louisiana State Museum of Natural Science, which hosted a three-day POLAR-PALOOZA show in Baton Rouge in November, the climate change themes presented by the half-dozen researchers who spoke at the event resonated with attendees. Hurricane Katrina taught many people that we have to find ways to co-exist with nature, according to Sophie Warny, education director at the museum and an NSF grantee who works in palynology, the study of fossil pollen.

“Like the Inuit population in Barrow, Alaska, we are in the front line here,” she says. “We are in a low lying area, so that even a slight melting of polar ice could produce a big [disruption] of the coastline, with [a] major impact on our economy — fisheries and oil production in the coast — geography, population distribution, way of life, culture, etc.”

Warny says the public is slowly accepting the facts about climate change, even if some of the basics of the science — such as the

dramatically elevated levels of carbon dioxide found in ice cores since the Industrial Revolution — haven't yet stuck in the minds of most.

“Various members of the public asked us at the end of the show what they can do to do their part,” Warny says. “That, in itself, and seeing the children clap their hands on the beat of the [presentation] music was a fantastic way to end the show — and hoping that we made a difference in a state such as Louisiana.”

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