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AAAS Caribbean Division Meeting to Mark Darwin Milestones and International Year of Astronomy

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Edward W. Lempinen ⁽¹⁾

News ⁽²⁾

The AAAS Caribbean Division will convene 24 October in San Juan, Puerto Rico, with a program that honors the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin and explores the importance and impact of astronomy in Latin America and beyond.

The divisions day-long annual meeting will feature two speakers of special prominence: Biologist Antonio Lazcano, a researcher and best-selling author who has devoted his career to studying the origins of life and advancing the importance of science education; and Daniel R. Altschuler, former director of Puerto Ricos Arecibo Observatory, the world's largest and most sensitive radiotelescope.

Antonio Lazcano

Daniel R. Altschuler

The conference will be dedicated to Altschuler, who, like Lazcano, has been a strong advocate of a deeper engagement between researchers and the public.

The conference will also include scientific sessions and workshops of interest to teachers and students, including two-hour “green chemistry” workshops for students in elementary, middle, and high school, said Caribbean Division President Jorge Colón.

“We are celebrating this important year for science with an exciting program that reflects the historical contributions of Astronomy and Darwin to our understanding of our place in the universe,” said Colón. “The whole conference and the workshops will reflect our firm belief of the need for science to engage with the public.

“The lectures by Dr. Lazcano and Dr. Altschuler will be magnificent examples of how to promote the public understanding of science,” said Colón, an associate professor of chemistry at the University of Puerto Rico. “Being a chemist myself, I am particularly proud of being able to celebrate our annual conference during the National Chemistry Week ⁽³⁾, and our workshops for public school children and one of two for high school teachers will deal with chemical aspects of climate change and green chemistry.”

The Caribbean Division was founded in 1985, and its meetings often have focused on issues of global interest marine science, island ecology, new energy sources, neuroscience, and AIDS, among others. The division also works closely with the Puerto Rico Science Teachers Association.

This years meeting will be held on the final day of the Southeastern Regional Meeting of the American Chemical Society ⁽⁴⁾, which is being held in San Juan for the first time from 21-24 October. The AAAS Caribbean Division is co-sponsoring that meeting, and will have a booth in its exhibition hall.

Colón said that this years Caribbean Division theme “Astronomy and the Origin of Life” will be the framework for a

celebration of the International Year of Astronomy [5], the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, and the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's masterwork, "On the Origin of Species."

Lazcano is a biology researcher and professor in the School of Sciences at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (the National Autonomous University of Mexico) in Mexico City. He has studied the origin and early evolution of life for more than 35 years, and his 1984 book, "The Origin of Life," has sold more than 600,000 copies. He has held scholarly posts in France, Spain, Cuba, Switzerland, Russia, and the United States.

Among his many leadership and advisory posts, Lazcano was the first Latin American scientist to serve as president of the International Society for the Study of the Origin of Life.

His plenary talk, "Darwin and Microorganisms," will consider how Darwin's ideas have guided the study of evolution among microorganisms.

"Darwin never spoke of microorganisms in formulating his theory of the evolution of species," says the abstract for Lazcano's talk. "[But] in our time the epidemic of swine flu, the resistance of many pathogenic bacteria to antibiotics, and the antiretroviral therapies that are applied to the carriers of the human immunodeficiency virus are clear examples of the process of biological evolution.

"It is clear that not only are they [microorganisms] the oldest life forms on this planet, but that over billions of years they changed the characteristics of the Earth, changing the composition of the oceans, sediments and atmosphere. Knowledge of this interaction between the biosphere and the planet has profound implications in our efforts to explore the possibilities of life elsewhere in the universe."

Altschuler, now on the physics faculty at the University of Puerto Rico, will speak on "Extraterrestrials and Extraterrestrial Life" during a two-hour astronomy session. Joining him will be University of Puerto Rico colleagues Carmen Pantoja and Mayra Lebrón, who will speak about Johannes Kepler, one of the pioneers of modern astronomy, and the International Year of Astronomy.

Altschuler was born in Uruguay. He is the author of "Children of the Stars: Our Origin, Evolution and Destiny," which was written for the general public and released in both Spanish and English.

He was project director for the Arecibo Visitor and Educational Facility, responsible for fund-raising, the construction of the buildings and the exhibition program. The center now attracts over 120,000 visitors per year and Altschuler considers it among his most satisfying achievements.

In remarks introducing "Children of the Stars," Altschuler spelled out the importance of public engagement.

"It is not enough for scientists alone to understand the workings of nature," he wrote. "It is important that every citizen understands what scientists have been able to learn, not only because it is interesting, truly fascinating, but also because difficult decisions must be made by all, and can only be made with a clear understanding of the issues.... A good part of this state of affairs has been the consequence of the little interest and less time taken by scientists to communicate with the public."

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[5] <http://www.astronomy2009.org/>