

Dear NOW Advisory Board members and other friends of NOW,

I trust you are all well and flourishing. It's been a while since the previous circular, and there's some substantial news. I'll list the main news below item by item, and will return to each of them in separate circulars at the appropriate time. The purpose of this circular is to keep you up to date with developments, and to encourage you to express your opinion on any matter you would like to comment on.

In the "Ten Years NOW" circular from December 2006 I optimistically wrote that we would switch within 2007 from the Servoy-based user interface to a PHP-based one. As you must have noticed if you have visited the database, we once more encountered major delays in this project. However at this writing we REALLY are finally very close to launching it. I will not mention dates, but it is almost there. Other than getting rid of the various Servoy-related nuisances it will not bring any changes to speak of, and all of the nice features introduced by Gudrun Evans will be preserved.

Also on the technical side, we have recently moved our database physically to reside on a server in the Finnish Museum of Natural History, which has kindly agreed to provide a home for it as well as basic technical support. I'm personally very happy about this. Our database has become a major international resource and really needs to reside in a context that can provide long-term stability. It is of course still up to us to develop the database itself, including technical aspects like the user interface.

The expansion of NOW continues. The Harvard Siwaliks dataset continues to go in at a steady rate, the Pleistocene dataset of Diana Pushkina's PhD thesis has been made public, and the compilation of Old World Palaeogene data also continues. However I have put that project on a slow track because of some more exciting, very recent developments.

The biggest news is that Christine Janis has offered to include the data of her Tertiary Mammals of North America monographs in NOW, and offer that I think you will agree we cannot possibly resist. In fact I have taken the liberty of asking her to put together a North American advisory board, which she is in the progress of doing right now. Also big news is that the volume of African fossil mammals edited by our Board members Lars Werdelin and Bill Sanders is almost finished, and our African data will accordingly become greatly improved and extended in the near future. Couple this with the two forthcoming meetings in Beijing on Asian Neogene and Palaeogene mammals, and we are looking at a greatly enhanced, multicontinental dataset that will allow many kinds of exciting studies. Of course there will be a delay before all these data are made public, but I expect it to be a relatively short one.

One obvious consequence of these expansions is that NOW will cease to be limited to the Neogene and to the "Old World". I've written about this already on a couple of occasions, and have asked for opinions regarding the name of our database and its meaning. From the (relatively few) responses I've received I've concluded that members are happy with the expansion and not very concerned with the name. My own preference is to prefer or established acronym NOW, and give it a new meaning. My suggestion is "New and Old Worlds", a phrase that allows multiple interpretations in both the temporal and the spatial senses. Alternative suggestions are invited!

Another nice consequence is that we will no longer have difficulty including datasets like Ben Passey's stable isotope data, which have a major component of North American and African localities. It will also, in my view, make it easier to interface and share data with

other databases, for fossil mammals as well as for many other kinds of spatially and temporally resolved Cenozoic data, which in turn will make it very much easier to use the database in the context of palaeoclimate modelling, a direction I personally find very promising.

I'd also like to bring up a matter that has been discussed on various occasions: how to acknowledge contributions to the database? My own feeling is that contributing data is a rather different form of activity than serving on the Advisory Board, and that we probably should create some kind of list of contributors. There are several ways of doing this, and I'd like to hear your opinions and suggestions. I'm aware of some issues, and suspect there are more. First, it may be difficult to reconstruct contributors during the many years since the "Reisensburg" dataset was made public in 1996, but since most of us have been involved ever since perhaps this can be done. Secondly, as long as we do not have any staff to maintain the database I wouldn't like us to introduce a system that requires a lot of work to maintain. Thus something like a list of individuals would seem better than a list of individual contributions. This brings up a third issue: that it will be difficult to acknowledge the very active contributors as distinct from those who have made only one or a few contributions. With these and other issues, would it still be desirable to do something about acknowledging contributions? Opinions?

I see that this became rather longer than I had expected, but I don't see anything that I'd like to delete. Please give this a minute or two if you can and let me know your thoughts. And ask me, if you like, about South American and Australia...

All the best from a snowy, sunny Helsinki!

Mikael