Dinosaur Adventure Land, or How Max Defeated the Creationist Swing Set

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Kent Hovind, the founder of the Creation Science Evangelism ministry, opened Dinosaur Adventure Land (DAL), a young-earth creationist theme park in Pensacola, Florida, in 2001, just a few months before I moved there with my family. It gained a minor degree of notoriety in the skeptical community for its laughable stance on science (Martinez 2004, for example), and a major degree of notoriety in the Pensacola community for Hovind's criminal conviction for tax evasion.

RNCSE readers are well acquainted with DAL (Duncan 2009), and a comprehensive local review is available at Pensapedia (http://www.pensapedia.com/wiki/Dinosaur_Adventure_Land). Even though DAL appears to be in eclipse at this point, it is not a unique manifestation of creationism. Answers in Genesis is planning a very large biblical theme park in Kentucky focused on Noah's Ark (http://arkencounter.com/). So, rather than to repeat the information in those articles, my intention is to present a parent's experience with DAL. The experience for parents whose children attend other creationist venues is probably of a similar nature.

Pensacola is a pleasant place to raise a family, with gorgeous white sand beaches, mild weather, and friendly people. The area leans Republican, and the inhabitants are very religious. I grew up in LaBelle, Florida, which is in a very conservative area of south Florida, so I'm comfortable with life in this sort of community; I have the antibodies.

In grade school, my favorite subject was always science, and it was not easy to reconcile what I was taught on Sunday with what I learned the rest of the week. I remember my 7th-grade biology teacher’s apologizing for having to discuss evolution. "I am required to present the theory, and you need to understand the theory," she explained, obviously troubled, and heavily stressing the word theory. There was no doubt what her actual beliefs were.

Now that I’m a father, I’m trying very hard to ensure that my two children have access to the best science and mathematics education I can find for them. It's surprisingly easy to do, because they are both very bright kids, voracious readers, and talented students. My wife and I basically just have to keep our home bookshelves stocked and help the kids with their homework, and they devour any information put in front of them. My daughter Amy, 12, was laughed at by two classmates because she didn’t know who Justin Bieber was. “So what?” Amy sniffed. “They don’t know what an Archaeopteryx is.” She wants to be a paleontologist. My son Max's favorite TV show is Mythbusters, and he loves to listen to Brian Dunning’s Skeptoid podcast on the way to school in the mornings. He’s 10 and is fascinated by planetary geology.
About five years ago, a boy living two houses down the street invited Max to a birthday party at DAL. At the time I had a vague idea of what DAL was about, but didn't know who Kent Hovind was and had no idea how over-the-top the park really was. So please imagine my horror driving into the DAL parking lot and seeing the big sign stretched over the opening in the Jurassic Park font: “DINOSAUR ADVENTURE LAND: The place where Dinosaurs and the Bible meet!”

“Uh-oh,” I thought. “I’ve made a mistake bringing Max here, and now it’s decision time: turn around or stick it out.” I was already in the parking lot. We had accepted the invitation and I didn’t want to have to lie my way out of the party. The birthday boy’s mother is a very, very nice lady, a widow and single mother, and we have a very tight-knit neighborhood, having been through Hurricane Ivan together. I didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. Plus, Max had already seen the dinosaurs, and he wanted in.

To a child, the coolness of dinosaurs is absolute and the presence of the Bible does not attenuate that. I also realized that he would inevitably face creationism, no matter how many Junior Scientist books I bought for him, so this could be a teaching moment, a chance to inoculate him against creationism. I decided to be as graceful as I could, and bite my tongue during the party, and have a long talk with Max afterward.

DAL was a small place. It was essentially a playground with a few exhibits, several fiberglass dinosaurs, a climbing wall, and a couple of buildings. The smallest building was the “Creation Museum,” bedecked with a grinning T.rex head. Next to it was the much larger “Science Center” (which was closed because Hovind hadn’t purchased the proper permits to build it). When we entered the park, Max’s party of young children was gathering on the steps of the Science Center for an introductory lecture by the park’s staff. The park guides were all clean-cut young adults. Later, I asked some of them where they came from, and they answered cheerfully that they were mostly students from the nearby fundamentalist Pensacola Christian College.

The staff began their lecture to the birthday party. “You’re going to have so much fun! And you’re going to fill your heads, too! You’re going to be soooooo smart when you leave here! Are you ready? Praise Jesus!”

While the guides were warming up the kids, I noticed a large diorama nearby. It had a diagram of the Grand Canyon, with a poorly written explanation of how it was formed by the Noachian Flood. I browsed some of the other exhibits set up on the porch of the Science Center—evidently moved out of there after it had been closed. Nearly every exhibit in the park featured a Bible verse, to drive home a scriptural lesson. The majority of these were pretty generic—verses attesting to God’s truth, his greatness, the duty of followers to proclaim such greatness, and so on. But some were uniquely chosen to counter particular tenets of modern science. Favorite topics were the age of the earth and the six-day sequence of creation events.

The kids were led through several of the exhibits, while the guides explained them in bright, cheerful, age-appropriate language. At every stop, the science was perfunctory, the Scripture lesson was emphasized, and the kids were pulled into the discussion as much as possible. “Do you think your great-great grandparents were monkeys? That’s silly, isn’t it?”
This was a young group, so they didn’t get taken through the Creation Museum; rather, they were quickly moved to more lively activities. They were shown a climbing wall—complete with a verse and lesson about how God helps you climb over obstacles. They were placed in a seat suspended by a pulley system that demonstrated mechanical advantage—or more importantly, the lift that God gives you.

The kids could jump off a trampoline and dunk a basketball, and learn some vague spiritual lesson about slam-dunking sin or stuffing a two-pointer with God’s love or something equally inane (I’m not sure, because I had taken a bathroom break, and was thumbing through the fine selection of Jack Chick tracts in the DAL men’s room). Or they could look at human footprints pressed into concrete next to some dinosaur footprints, complete with a lesson fit for pasting to a shellacked wooden plaque and selling in a truck stop.

My favorite “exhibit” was a harness and swivel arrangement in which shrieking children were spun around wildly and taught for 10 seconds about centrifugal force and two minutes about how the devil spins you around and makes you sick and confused, just like the dizziness the poor, nauseous kids felt when they climbed out of the harness. After this experience, the little children were indeed suffering to come to Him, stumbling and trying not to vomit. Finally, the kids were cut loose to swarm the swingsets and playground equipment.

While Max burned off some energy on the jungle gym, I stepped into the Creation Museum. It was like a tour of the inside of the Unibomber’s head. Inside was a handful of rooms filled with a disorganized jumble of anti-science screeds and near-illiterate rants against the “liar” Charles Darwin and the “fruits” of his theory: concentration camps, eugenics, slavery, Marxism, liberalism, and other horrors. You could see displays about how human co-existed with dinosaurs, how dinosaurs are still alive (the Loch Ness Monster is one, of course!), and how radiometric dating is invalid. I could only take a few minutes of it before I had to leave the museum and go sit by the picnic tables, wondering if I had done my son a disservice.

**On Closer Examination**

I can sum up DAL in a word: shabby. The dinosaurs looked shabby, the displays were shabby, the attractions and activities were shabby, and above all the ideas were shabby. All of this was earnestly sold to visitors and their children as a learning experience, something that would enlighten them. The word TRUTH was scattered around the park and appeared in much of the displays’ text. TRUTH was DAL’s talisman. I could see why DAL’s designers felt it so important to stamp the word TRUTH all over the park, and why they had to scatter so many Bible verses around; it’s because doing so seems to add substance to arguments that are as hollow and flimsy as Hovind’s fiberglass dinosaurs.

There were few arguments presented in that place that couldn’t be utterly destroyed by a basic knowledge of biology or geology—even a reasonably bright high school student could dismiss most of them. Most children really are taught better than this, but DAL was an attempt to dissolve its visitors’ learning. By attaching scripture—something that has a lot of emotional weight to many people—to their slapdash exhibits, DAL leveraged that weight to short-circuit any reasoned analysis of their arguments. Creationists like Hovind associate their ideas with TRUTH, and righteousness, and all that they find good and im-
important and defensible because they want to exempt those ideas from competent analysis. It was not so much an attempt to manipulate people as an example of a worldview that if an idea doesn’t come directly from and agree completely with Scripture, it doesn’t exist, it isn’t true, and it must be resisted. “TRUTH” is simply more important to creationists than facts, or reason, or science.

I left DAL very angry. My children live in a world that they are allowed to question. They believe that if they read and study long enough, they can learn about anything they want. The world is understandable, researchable, and wonderful to them, and there is no point past which they are expected to stop thinking. TRUTH isn’t a sign that blocks them from continuing to ask questions, and it’s not a Bible verse that conditions them to reflexively accept slipshod thought as unassailable fact. If they encounter a limit to our knowledge, their response isn’t to pray passively for enlightenment; it is to find ways to push those limits further.

**The Aftermath**

After the birthday party was over, we were driving home. Max was rifling through his goodie bag full of plastic dinosaurs and crunching malted milk balls. I decided that it was time to start repairing the damage. “What did you think about that place?” I asked him.

“The swingsets were fun,” he said. “But they said humans lived at the same time as dinosaurs. Everyone knows humans didn’t exist until millions of years after the dinosaurs.”

That’s my boy!

DAL is now closed, and has been since 2009. Its creator’s own misdeeds brought it down. No surprise; Hovind is considered extreme even by other creationist organizations. This is a man who heartily recommends *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (but he “loves the Jews!”) and firmly believes 9/11 was a US government plot, and his conviction record suggests that he feels he can ignore any law that does not agree with his dogma. Even Answers in Genesis thinks his ideas reflect badly on the creationist movement.

DAL was kept open by the Christian Science Evangelism ministry for a few years after Hovind’s conviction on tax evasion charges, but it is now closed, and its URL (http://www.dinosauradventureland.com) now takes users to the website of “The Creation Store” in Pensacola where they can buy “charts and graphs ... books and DVDs as well as many other items, all explaining the truth about our great creator.” On August 31, 2011, the Creation Store held an event they called the “Dog Days Kids Event”. It featured Eric Hovind (Kent’s son) and Paul Taylor of Answers in Genesis UK and promised “Fun Activities Including: dog petting, creation lesson on dogs, dog training lessons.” A video on their home page invites viewers, “Join us as we celebrate the creation of man’s best friend, the dog! We will have several special guests, including Deputy Patrick Crossly and his canine partner, Dasty!” Let that sink in: a deputy of the Escambia County Sheriff’s office was a featured attendee for a creationist kids’ event.

DAL was a silly, shoddy, risible, and stupid institution. It was built and operated illegally and when it closed, it was a laughing stock, even here in deep-red Pensacola. It was an embarrassment to a movement that desperately wants respectability. But the creationist movement sees their activity as a calling; and when God calls, you don’t let a setback stop
you. Since DAL closed, Hovind's movement is evolving (pun intended). Note that a sheriff’s deputy was recently featured at one of their events, and they’re working with international creationist groups. And if you follow US politics, you know that creationist groups have the ear of powerful political figures. DAL is gathering dust these days, but its creators are not going to stop trying to recruit children and families to their cause.

But they won't get my Amy and Max.

REFERENCES


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