

## Science, Straight Up

Written by Rochana Rapkins on February 26, 2010.

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For the last few months, crowds of youthful, well-groomed New Yorkers have flocked to the American Museum of Natural History the first Wednesday of each month to hear lectures on Darwin and social media, the search for life in the universe and the biological basis for greed. An added enticement? Free admission, a DJ and a cash bar, which are part of the museum's bid to attract new visitors.

"They've been very successful," said public programs director Ellen Silberman, who said the first SciCafe event unexpectedly drew 300 visitors.

The museum's new monthly science series has attracted a younger crowd with catchy topics and a cash bar.

"It's a younger crowd," she said. "They enjoy having drinks available. It allows them to meet people in their field who may share their interests."

The upcoming March 3 event features Cornell Fuel Cell Institute director Héctor Abruña, who will discuss new technologies for energy generation and storage, including the development of high performance batteries and fuel cell technology.



Given concerns with fuel emissions and dependency on foreign oil, interest in the potential application of these technologies in the transportation sector is especially keen.

"In batteries, people are looking for higher capacity materials so you can drive an electric car more than, let's say, 30 or 40 miles, and that they have fast charge rates so you can charge them in an hour as opposed to eight hours," Abruña said.

It is also a case of matching the technology to a particular need. For instance, in northern latitudes, fuel cells can be used in buildings to generate both heat and electricity.

“You use the heat generated by the fuel cell to heat the building itself,” Abruña said. “There are lots of schemes being put forth depending on the application. It wouldn’t make much sense to do that in Arizona, where it is already pretty toasty.”

Scientists estimate that it will take 15 years to develop fuel cell technology in cars, and it is expected that by that time, battery powered cars will also have evolved.

The subject matter may not be quite as tantalizing as the SciCafe’s Valentine’s Day offering, “Why Humans Have Sex,” with evolutionary psychologist David M. Buss. Nonetheless, the talk is sure to attract another large crowd of museumgoers eager to encounter new facts—and new faces.

“It’s in the Hall of Planet Earth,” Silberman said. “It’s a really cool space with lots of rocks around. There’s no better place to have a cocktail party.”

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***March 3, American Museum of Natural History, enter at Rose Center on West 81st Street (betw. Central Park West and Columbus Avenue), 212-769-5100; 7 p.m., free with cash bar (must be 21+ with ID).***