

Encouraging people to pay for science

WHEN THE organisers of a scientific gathering that has been gradually losing money and audiences for the last decade say they expect thousands of ordinary non-scientific citizens to pay \$8 for the privilege of travelling to Clayton and attending a half-day session at this year's effort, sceptical laughter is perhaps excusable.

But that is just what Monash University's inheritors of the legacy of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) Congress are saying. In order to revitalise the ANZAAS tradition they are organising a Festival of Science aimed squarely at interesting and involving the general public and students as well as scientists and social scientists.

What is more, under the chairmanship of the former Dean of Science at Monash, Professor John Swan, and the presidency of New Zealand ambassador and mountain climber, Sir Edmund Hillary, they have every confidence they will be successful.

"There's a whole range of indicators that people's interest in science is growing. Look at the number of popular science journals that have popped up in the last year or at the success of the television program, 'Towards 2000' or at the interest in computing in the schools," Swan said.

Even so, to translate that interest into bums-on-seats in Clayton is going to take some doing. But John Swan thinks it can be achieved with the help of deer farming and allergies, bushfires and the paranormal, AUSSAT and the preservation of music. He believes that the tag science covers many of the most interesting things in our lives, things many of us would pay \$8 to find out about.

The organisers have asked Australian and New Zealand scientists and social scientists to submit ideas for sessions on any topic which seems particularly important to them, and on which they are prepared to run a half-day session which will attract a paying public.

Debate between scientists of different disciplines also is encouraged.

Swan said: "The ideas for sessions are judged on four criteria. The people involved must be the best in their field. They must be communicators who are effective enough to cross disciplines and get through to the general public. How the session is presented is important; it must not be hamstrung by a talking heads format. And there has to be a market for it."

Take the session on deer farming, for instance. The convener, Professor Roger Short of the Monash Department of Physiology, reckons he can interest 250 scientists, farmers, businessmen and environmentalists in attending. But just to make sure, the \$8 also will entitle the participants to a demonstration of darting and rocket-netting deer by helicopter, access to a local deer farm, and a venison barbecue. How is that for value!

Dr Tony Burgess, the director of the Ludwig Institute of Cancer Research, is willing to organise a session on the latest in his field that will not only cater for the educated layperson, but also will be appropriate to doctors for professional development. He is confident there is enough interest both in the general and medical communities to ensure a large audience.

But that is just the start of what is going to be happening at ANZAAS. Because this year it is not just a congress but a whole Festival of Science — a la arts festival.

For starters, there will be a Community Science and Technology program designed to show people what is happening in research laboratories and industry as well as demonstrate how technology affects their daily lives. Organiser Mr Bill Charles, who is employed on a grant from the Victorian Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Technology, hopes to have 150 scientific displays, demonstrations and events running in all parts of Melbourne before and during the congress.

"The program will go beyond simply an arrangement of open houses. It will endeavour



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to demonstrate the interdependence between science and its consequences — the physics behind a tram in the street, the chemistry behind a glass of beer, the electronics behind our telecommunications and emergency services."

The Festival of Science organisers also believe in getting to people while they are young. So they have engaged top people from universities and the media to design a special Youth ANZAAS, to be attended by at least two year 11 students from every secondary school in Victoria, as well as others from all over Australia and New Zealand and possibly Papua New Guinea.

These younger participants will be assisted to come to Melbourne by service clubs. On four mornings, they will attend their own special sessions in the Dallas Brooks Hall and on Wednesday afternoon will be addressed by Sir Edmund Hillary. The rest of the time they will be taken to the displays of the Community Science and Technology program or to sessions of the congress.

The special three-hour sessions will be on Light, Life, Time and Space and will make use of sophisticated audio-visuals, lively lecturers and fascinating demonstrations to get their point across. They will be professionally presented stage presentations which will be filmed for television.

Perhaps the jewel in the crown of the festival will be the ASEAN Interaction — a one-day workshop/conference to be held at the Victorian Arts Centre to which it is hoped at least six scientists from each ASEAN nation will be invited.

ANZAAS is nearly 100 years old. But of late it has had declining support even within the scientific community. The reason is, John Swan says, that as more and more specialist organisations for specific disciplines appeared, they usurped the relevance of ANZAAS to many scientists.

But the paradox is, he says, that as science becomes more and more fragmented and complex, ANZAAS remains the only forum capable of getting scientists from different disciplines together — something which is becoming more and more critical. It also remains one of the few vehicles for involving the general public.

For full details of the Festival of Science program, write to ANZAAS Festival of Science Office, Monash University, Wellington Road, Clayton 3168, Victoria or telephone (03) 541 4011.

