The AAAS Center for Public Engagement with Science and Technology in 2008 helped to raise awareness for endangered species, climate change, the importance of teaching evolution, obesity and its disproportionate impact on families with fewer resources, and other issues at the crossroads of science, society, and personal values. Through events, resources for journalists worldwide, and professional development for scientists and engineers, two AAAS units — the Office of Public Programs, and Education and Human Resources — worked to communicate science broadly.

World’s Largest General Science Meeting

AIDS is the top cause of death in Africa and the seventh largest cause of death worldwide, and places like Eastern Europe, Vietnam, and China are the latest hotspots in the epidemic, said Peter Piot, Executive Director, UNAIDS, and under-secretary general of the United Nations. Successes like the rise in antiretroviral medicines delivered to people in the developing world mean “we are entering a new phase of responsibility because we are seeing results,” he said during a “Global Health Sessions” panel at the 2008 AAAS Annual Meeting. He was joined by Jim Yong Kim, Director of the Francois Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard School of Public Health, and Timothy Wirth, president of the United Nations Foundation and Better World Fund.

The plenary panel exemplified the conference mandate, set forth by AAAS Board Chair David Baltimore (2008-2009), to provide a forum for international perspectives on key science and technology issues. Toward that end, attendees also learned that 96% of Rwanda’s primary-school-age children receive a free education. Moreover, by the year 2012, Rwanda President Paul Kagame said, his government hopes to invest 5% of its gross domestic product on its science and technology capacity, surpassing similar spending by the United States. A special town hall event for middle-school teachers emphasized the global aspects of the childhood obesity epidemic.

Abelson Seminar: Science, Stress, and Health

Emerging scientific insights are now suggesting new tools for fighting the negative health effects of stress, according to Robert Sapolsky and other experts at the 2008 Philip Hauge Abelson Advancing Science Seminar. Sapolsky, the John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn Professor of Neurology and Neurological Sciences at Stanford University, explained that short-term stress triggers beneficial physiological responses in animals and people. But when stress continues for extended periods, it can contribute to stress-related disorders, including insulin resistance, increased fat deposition, hypertension, elevated platelet viscosity, and changes in the brain’s learning and memory center. Seminar speakers described research that may someday lead to breakthroughs such as new therapies for alcoholism, neurodegenerative disorders, and anxiety; and strategies for improving the effectiveness of vaccine regimens; and for more effectively helping traumatized children and veterans. The event honors the late Philip Abelson, who served as editor of Science for 22 years, then as AAAS senior advisor. Watch video at www.aaas.org/go/abelson.
New Tools for Communicating Science

Nearly 400 scientists and engineers have so far participated in how-to workshops on communicating science to the public and to reporters. Launched at the 2008 Annual Meeting, a half-dozen sessions — from North Carolina to Oregon — plus two Webinars have been conducted as part of the “AAAS Communicating Science: Tools for Scientists and Engineers” initiative. The program, supported by AAAS and the U.S. National Science Foundation, also provides basic online resources such as journalist essays and sample responses to hot-topic questions regarding climate change, stem cells, and evolution. Workshops help guide attendees in developing clear, concise messages about science for public audiences. Participants are encouraged to practice their on-camera interview skills, and they receive practical tips from researchers, journalists, and public outreach professionals. Managed by Tiffany Lohwater, public engagement manager for AAAS, the initiative is helping to bridge the communications gap between scientists and the public. See www.aaas.org/communicatingscience.

EurekaTube! Makes Its Debut

Video clips on EurekaTube! — a new feature of EurekAlert!, the premier AAAS science-news Web site for reporters — range from an animation of jet and wind about a micro-quasar, to graceful, slow-motion footage of a bat landing upside down on a ceiling. EurekAlert! now serves approximately 6,700 reporters working in 75 countries, and because 50% of those journalists are working outside the United States: “It's now a full-fledged, global science communications resource,” Director Patrick McGinness said. EurekAlert! promotes public engagement with science and technology, too, by drawing nearly 1 million unique public visitors per month. Some 1,100 leading research and medical organizations subscribe to post eligible breaking news releases. News can then be freely browsed in advance of embargo-release times, via a password-protected portal, by credentialed reporters. The keyword-searchable EurekAlert! Multimedia Gallery was expanded in 2008 to include short audio and video clips. Log onto www.eurekalert.org/multimedia.

First Science Press Briefing in China

Catherine Matacic, Associate Editor for EurekAlert! Chinese, the Chinese-language version of the AAAS science-news service for reporters, traveled to Beijing in 2008 to coordinate what was believed to be the first China-based press conference related to a Science paper. Research by Kongming Wu, Yanhui Lu, and Hongqiang Feng of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences suggested that genetically engineered cotton had reduced cotton-bollworm populations and also seemed to benefit other crops, reporters learned. The Beijing press briefing coincided with a meeting between the Science Editor-in-Chief and the Chinese Premier, plus other major events in China. (See page 7.) Go to http://chinese.eurekalert.org.

Field Notes – AAAS Divisions

The annual AAAS Caribbean Division meeting in 2008 brought graduate and K-12 students “face-to-face with real scientists and exposed them to what researchers and their work looks like,” said Biochemistry Professor Margarita Irizarry-Ramírez of the University of Puerto Rico. “These experiences often get students excited about science and broaden their vision of what a scientist does, perhaps encouraging them to study math and science in college.” Another regional AAAS meeting, convened by the Pacific Division, probed threats to Hawaii's endangered birds, snails, turtles, fish, and plants. At the Arctic Division meeting in Fairbanks, 170 scientists and engineers evaluated the latest research findings and observations on global climate change. “It is a reality that we have to deal with now,” said speaker Virgil “Buck” Sharpton of the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Alaska, a member of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. “The Arctic is key to the nation's economy, policy, and strategic strength. Few in the Lower 48 have an appreciation of this fact.” In Albuquerque, the Southwestern and Rocky Mountain Division's 2008 annual meeting explored how regional scientific collaboration can help address global issues. Online www.aaas.org/go/divisions.

2008 Annual Meeting news from Boston is online at http://news.aaas.org/2008