

Letters

Travel Restrictions Hurt Scientific Exchanges

The impending restrictions on foreign travel should be of serious concern to the scientific community. Not only will the proposed tax on foreign travel reduce contacts between American scientists and their colleagues abroad, but even more threatening are the restrictions which government agencies may impose upon foreign travel financed by federal funds.

Scientists should urge the government to consider the dangers of such restrictions. It is well known how important are personal contacts with foreign centers in planning future research; these contacts may save U.S. science large amounts of money and effort, which would otherwise be spent on duplication and repetition of work being done elsewhere. It is also a fact that correspondence by mail cannot replace personal contacts.

In particular, it would be most unfortunate if the participation of American scientists at foreign meetings and conferences were seriously restricted. Most of these meetings are regular events whose location rotates between the U.S. and abroad. Curtailing American participation abroad would result in smaller participation of foreign visitors at meetings in the U.S. Thus scientific contacts would be reduced without any gain in dollars.

Furthermore, there is an important prestige question involved. The U.S. still maintains a leading position in most scientific fields and this position should be clearly demonstrated at these conferences. This is done not only by presentation of high quality work carried out in the U.S.; it is also exhibited by the fact that the people who did the work are available for discussion, advice, and collaboration. There would be a subtle eroding effect on the prestige of U.S. science, if some active American scientists were prevented from attending important meetings.

Finally, whenever restrictions are imposed, the younger and less known scientists from smaller institutions are the first to be struck from the list. This

group already suffers greatly from the present financial stringencies. They are more than ever in need of good contacts and direct interchange with the international community, in order to be able to choose the best and most productive means of using the restricted research possibilities which are left to them. Thus, there is a strong case in favor of exempting scientific foreign travel from any restrictions imposed by government agencies.

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I was going to send this to my senators and a couple of congressmen, but decided I'd rather have more readers than that.

It seems ironic that the restrictions on foreign trade and travel are often so prevalent in this country, whose main population is made up of immigrants. We seem to be strongly in favor of pumping money into foreign education programs, into foreign aid, into Fulbright and other programs, into the hopefully-to-be-funded program in international education, and yet we throw every conceivable roadblock in the way of the ordinary tourist who wants to take a trip abroad before he is so old that he isn't going to appreciate it. Who among us is dull enough to think that governments really make friends? Only people make friends, and it is the average guy and his family traveling abroad that can do the most good.

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Pest Control: Advise and Consent

I suspect few scientists would care to submit disagreements among themselves regarding matters of scientific judgments to courts of law for solution, the method being pursued by the Environmental Defense Fund ("Environmental pollution: Scientists go to court," 22 Dec., p. 1552). Since scientists are testifying

for both sides, these court cases suggest that the law provides an appropriate judge of scientific competency.

When environmental problems such as these which clearly affect the public interest were first recognized in 1961, the federal government established the Federal Committee on Pest Control. This board, composed of government representatives who are experts in ecology, wildlife management, public health, chemistry of pesticides, entomology, and others, reviews pest control projects proposed by federal agencies. It examines each project with regard to the safety of man, animals, and the total environment. During the deliberations, the agency making the proposal is encouraged to have a representative present to explain and defend the plan. Usually he has the authority to alter the agency's plans to meet any objections raised by the FCPC. Thus, the necessary modifications in the plans are made before the FCPC makes its formal recommendations. While not binding upon a federal agency, these are generally followed, and valued for their objectivity.

If a court appoints a tribunal, presumably both parties to the litigation have an opportunity to nominate members to the tribunal. In the case of the Federal Committee on Pest Control, this is achieved by permitting each of the federal departments with primary concern to appoint an equal number of the members.

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Less Rain in Latin America

Portig (Letters, 26 Jan.) calls attention to possible regional decreases in rainfall that could result from the felling of the Amazon basin rain forest. Rainfall data from the state of Antioquia, Colombia, could be pertinent to this point. Table 1 shows the total rainfall for the years 1942 to 1967 at two stations. The 26-year period is divided into three equal parts, but the years 1945, 1946, 1961, and 1963 are excluded from both stations because data at one (El Bagre) for those years is incomplete. None of the six averages given is biased either by an exceptionally wet or an exceptionally dry year. Medellín is a mountain city (elevation 1500 meters), in the center of an area