Endangered U.S. Plants to Be Collected, Conserved

The seeds have been planted, figuratively, for a major private effort to collect and preserve the more than 3000 endangered varieties of plants in the United States. The program, which has been developed by scientists from 14 leading U.S. botanical gardens and arboretums, calls for the establishment of a national Center for Plant Conservation.

The size and diversity of the planned collection require that it be divided up into regional centers, where climate and scientific expertise will be most closely suited to particular plant varieties. Thus, the center will actually be a consortium of botanical gardens, with headquarters at Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum. Backers of the center are currently seeking foundation support.

The desirability of such a collection has been talked about for many years and was strongly recommended 6 years ago in a National Academy of Sciences report, "Conservation of germplasm resources, an imperative." Until now, however, there has been no real effort to build such a collection despite its imminent feasibility, according to Francis Thibodeau of Arnold Arboretum, the acting scientific director of the center. Although federal laws lay down a theoretical structure for preserving such species, conservation efforts are "hampered . . . by institutional impediments," he notes.

There are few parallels to the center, Thibodeau says. The closest one is the comparatively informal program directed by Kew Botanical Gardens in London for tracking rare European species. He says the U.S. Department of Agriculture maintains an extensive, well-organized collection of agriculturally useful plant varieties, but its goals are "much more utilitarian" than are those of the new center.

The collection of plants to be gathered for the new center represents from 10 to 15 percent of wild species in this country that are either "seriously endangered or threatened," Thibodeau says. "That's a very shocking number." Though the intricacies of why any particular species is threatened may vary, virtually all are faced with "human-induced problems," he says. "Botanists don't find that plants are going under for no apparent reason."

Besides its immediate goal of finding and saving endangered plants from extinction, the center is expected to serve several needs of the plant research community. First, it will offer plentiful opportunities to study rare plants about which little is known beyond their structural features. By growing them in botanical gardens, researchers will be able to study their growth and ecological requirements. And eventually, as the collection grows and its diversity becomes more widely appreciated, researchers may comb through it looking for sources of unrecognized medicinals or other potentially useful chemicals.

The center expects to secure grants that will allow it to begin implementing plans soon. The early stages will involve identifying and collecting the most vulnerable species, leading gradually to an ever-larger collection.—**JEFFREY L. FOX**

OMB Relents on Rescue Satellite

In a last minute reversal, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has agreed to let the United States participate fully in the international search and rescue satellite program, SARSAT, one of the few remaining cooperative agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union (*Science*, 7 September, p. 999). U.S. delegates accordingly signed a pact renewing the program at a meeting in Leningrad on 1 October.

The SARSAT transponders, built by France and Canada, are designed to fly on U.S. polar-orbiting weather satellites, two of which are supposed to be in orbit at any given time. The Soviets, meanwhile, are flying equivalent equipment on their own weather satellites. OMB director David Stockman, however, has been trying for years to cut the U.S. two polar-orbiter system down to one orbiter as a cost-saving measure. His renewed efforts last summer sparked widespread concern that the United States, by reneging on its commitments to a popular and successful humanitarian program, would be handing the Soviets a propaganda coup.

On 18 September, however, in hearings before the House subcommittee on natural resources, it was revealed that the OMB had decided just the night before to relent. James Bailey, head of the SARSAT program at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), testified that the Administration would now support a two-SARSAT system. But he added that this was not a committment to fly the SARSAT's on NOAA weather satellites indefinitely. Perhaps they could fly on future Landsats, or even on dedicated satellites.

The subcommittee, while applauding the Administration's support for SARSAT, was unimpressed with this latter suggestion. A new commercial Landsat is 4 years away if it flies at all. Moreover, under questioning from subcommittee chairman James Scheuer (D–N.Y.), Bailey admitted that Stockman's estimates of a $300 million savings on cutting back to one polar weather satellite "was quite a bit higher than the actual number would be." And when asked about the cost of a dedicated SARSAT satellite, he admitted that no one really knows.

—**M. MITCHELL WALDROP**

IIASA Wins Support

Continued American support for the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Austria now seems assured. Last year, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences took over the role as the American member of IIASA from the National Academy of Sciences, after the Reagan Administration decided the government couldn't afford the $2.3 million in annual dues.

The arts and sciences academy has succeeded in raising money, much of it from private corporations, to fulfill a reduced dues requirement of $1.4 million a year. Meanwhile the Administration has conducted a review of its stance and the State Department has indicated that it will no longer oppose contributions to IIASA projects by individual agencies, such as the Department of Energy.

Last month IIASA was further bolstered by the announcement that the

AAAS and the Social Science Research Council have joined the Academy in a consortium to work for continued support of the institute.

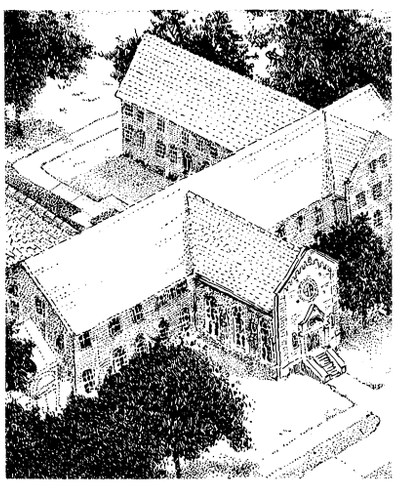
IIASA is still not well known despite the fact that it is now probably the only forum where Soviet and Western scientists are working cooperatively on long-term global problems. Under its new director, Thomas H. Lee from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Institute will be focussing in particular on global energy, environmental degradation, and industrial restructuring. Lee has cited acid rain as a problem that cuts across all three subjects. This will be addressed in a new project on sustainable development of the biosphere.

Administration officials have complained in the past that the Soviets were getting much more out of the IIASA arrangement than the Americans were. But Harvard economist Howard Raiffa, the Institute's first director, has said that this thinking discounts intangible benefits such as "when someone at the World Health Organization says he can always recognize a Soviet who has spent time at IIASA because he approaches problems so differently from other Soviet scientists."—**Constance Holden**

Congress, NIH Dedicate Center to Mary Lasker

A beautiful old convent that belonged to the cloistered Catholic Order of the Visitation was officially dedicated the Mary Woodard Lasker Center for Health Research and Education at ceremonies on 19 September at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The center, which adjoins the NIH campus in Bethesda, will house medical students interested in spending a year at NIH in research training under a program jointly sponsored by the institutes and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

The dedication ceremonies were a vivid reminder of the role philanthropist and consumate lobbyist Lasker has played over the years in persuading Congress to increase funds for medical research in areas she particularly favored. It was Lasker, for instance, who was the prime mover behind the National War on Cancer that gave the cancer institute special status and vast resources in the early 1970's. At the time, the majority of the academic research community deplored the fact that politics and Lasker's personal influence worked to give cancer research such prominence. Many would have preferred that NIH maintain its more equal distribution of funding based on the purer intellectual process of peer review. But Mary Lasker prevailed, just as she did a couple of years later when she convinced Congress to give special treatment to the National Heart Institute.



The Mary Woodward Lasker Center on the NIH campus.

Thomas (Tip) O'Neill, Speaker of the House of Representatives, captured Lasker's influence on Congress when he recalled a day in the early 1970's when Mary Lasker and her select coterie of well-known research physicians came to lunch on Capitol Hill. "You were so upset about funding for cancer, Mary," recalled O'Neill who, for his part, brought appropriations committee members to the lunch to be lobbied. O'Neill captured the way the business of health politics was conducted when he noted that $140 million was added to the cancer budget that day. The Lasker Center, said O'Neill, is "but a small token from a grateful nation."

Lasker, who is in her eighties, has been a powerhouse in NIH politics for decades. In brief remarks, she revealed that she had been sickly as a young girl and said, "I resolved to do something for medical research when I was 10 years old." She has.

—**Barbara J. Culliton**

Researcher's Suit Against NCI Wins Mixed Judgment

Pathologist Melvin D. Reuber who has sued his former employer, the National Cancer Institute (NCI), and several other parties for libel and damages has received a mixed judgment in his first round at court. A U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia has ordered that the defendants destroy all copies of a 1981 letter containing "false allegations" about Reuber. However, the court refused to award Reuber the monetary damages he sought.

Reuber's legal suit against NCI is one of three he has filed over the same issue (*Science*, 27 April, p. 367). In it, he claimed that he was harshly reprimanded and subsequently harassed out of his job at the Frederick Cancer Research Center in Frederick, Maryland. While working as a pathologist there in 1981, Reuber was reprimanded for mailing out his personal, unreviewed report calling the pesticide malathion carcinogenic. NCI official reports found malathion safe, including for use in aerial spraying to control fruit flies.

The Frederick lab is run by a private firm, Litton Bionetics, for the National Cancer Institute. Reuber's second suit is against Litton. A third suit, pending in Washington, D.C., charges lobbyists for Stauffer Chemical Company and the National Agricultural Chemicals Association with ruining Reuber's career.

The 26 March 1981 letter ordered destroyed by the court contained several false allegations, according to U.S. District Judge William B. Bryant. Those false assertions are that Reuber "knowingly and wrongfully" bypassed appropriate NCI and Frederick clearance procedures, and that he published manuscripts implying that the two agencies endorsed his views. However, the judge concluded that the evidence did not support the claim that NCI employee William (Vernon) Hartwell had leaked that letter of reprimand nor that there was a motive for him to injure Reuber personally.

The Judge's decision is viewed as a "symbolic victory" by Reuber's lawyer, Ray Battocchi. That victory faces them with a difficult decision over whether to appeal. —**Jeffrey L. Fox**