

Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Deforestation: Brazil's Surprise Role

Long criticized for its exploitation of the world's largest rain forest, Brazil is showing an increased interest in technical forecasts about the fate of this tropical resource. As part of the International Space Year program, Brazil is joining with Italy to direct the world's "first collective assessment of global deforestation."

Brazil was picked for this leadership role after several of its scientists got government permission to join 25 other nations in doing a comprehensive study of rain forests. Roberto Pereira da Cunha, director of remote sensing at Brazil's space agency, says the study will enable researchers from around the world to tackle the subject for the first time with uniform procedures.

Ichtiague Rasool, chief scientist for global change at NASA, who helped negotiate the pact, says the project will help re-

searchers resolve conflicts in earlier deforestation studies. To date, he notes, "everyone has been getting different numbers using different techniques."

Researchers are to gather in San Jose dos Campos, Brazil, later this month to develop a model that incorporates data bases from around the world. Observations from the U.S. Landsat system, a Brazilian satellite, the French SPOT satellite, and from ground-based stations will be incorporated into a digital data set to create a "Geographic Information System."

The assessment is to include rain forests in Thailand, Nepal, Africa, and other regions, producing the first results next year.

Lobbying for an Environmental NIH

Assuming that the health of the earth is at least as important as that of its inhabitants, a group of scientists recently met to begin campaigning for a National Institute for the Environment, modeled on the National Institutes of Health.

"I had the idea many years ago," says Henry Howell, a biologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The leading organizer is a friend, biologist Stephen Hubble of Princeton. "He and I have worked together on this since we were together years ago at the University of Iowa," says Howell.

In December, the two assembled an "informal workshop" in Washington attended by 20 academics and 24 observers, including lobbyists from professional societies and officials from the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Science Foundation.

A draft paper has been circulated, and "we are still at the preliminary stage," Howell says. He won't go into the details but says the general aim is to create an administrative structure that can run a system of competitive grants for research on the biotic, social, and economic dimensions of environmental change. The physical sciences are already pretty well covered by other agencies, he thinks.

A campaign to win congressional approval for the new institute will begin later this year.

Rogue AIDS Disk Alarms Researchers

Researchers at NIH and other public health centers received a warning over electronic networks just before Christmas about a dangerous new computer program designed to attack the unwary and scramble their data. The hostile program is concealed in a packet that claims to have been assembled by the "PC Cyborg Corporation" of Panama. It includes a slick flyer and a free offer: "AIDS Information—An Introductory Diskette."

According to an alarm that originated in London—where the diskette first appeared in mid-December—this "Trojan horse" asks and answers basic questions about the risk of becoming infected with AIDS. After it has been run a number of times, a hidden program on the diskette encrypts all pre-existing files it can reach.

By one estimate, at least 7000 copies of the packet were sent out to names on several mailing lists, including one sold by *PC Business World*, published in the United Kingdom. The prank cost someone tens of thousands of dollars to carry out. Thus far Scotland Yard has been unable to track the mailing to its source.

Meanwhile, NIH's computer virus eradicator Jim Del Priore reports that no infestation has appeared at NIH or anywhere else in the country. "It's fairly dastardly," says Del Priore, "so let's hope it doesn't turn up."

New Science-Minded Leadership in Romania

Romania's hoped-for entry into the modern world may be helped by the fact that its new prime minister, Petre Roman, is a European-trained engineer.

What's more, Roman and Romania's new president Ion Iliescu have been participating in an informal scientific discussion group created a few years ago by mathematician and sociologist Mihai Draganescu. The group met biweekly to talk about advances in science and technology in a nonpolitical atmosphere, according to the *New York Times*.

The 43-year-old Roman, said to be a cultivated and rather aristocratic individual, was educated at the University of Toulouse in France. He holds a professorship in hy-

drologic engineering at Bucharest's Polytechnic University. Reportedly, he has recently developed an interest in environmental issues.



President Iliescu (left) and Prime Minister Roman (right).

NSF to Spell Out Priorities

Without enough money to support every worthy project, how does the National Science Foundation decide who gets it and who doesn't? The House Committee on Science, Space and Technology expects an answer. It has directed NSF to prepare a report by 31 January 1990 describing how budget priorities are set, both within