Astronomy Agenda

■ Washington science policymaking often seems to live by a stern credo: never set priorities. According to the conventional wisdom, doing so means certain death for programs with low priority scores. Far better to claim that every program is a top priority, forcing Congress either to cut at random or to look elsewhere for easier game.

So it's something of a surprise to see a committee of astronomers getting ready to release a report on 19 March that will list, in order, the most important astronomical initiatives for the upcoming decade. So far, the panel—a standing committee of the National Academy of Sciences chaired by astrophysicist John Bahcall of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton—isn't saying which projects head the list. Even presidential science adviser D. Allan Bromley won't see the report until late February at the earliest.

Bahcall, however, provided a few details which suggest that space-based astronomy might be in for a rough ride. For one thing, space projects won't enjoy the luxury of being prioritized in isolation from those on the ground, as the panel decided to rank both groups head-to-head. For another, the committee has looked into how well astronomy is served by the space shuttle and a proposed moon-based observatory—two programs that have been favorite targets of opportunity for ground-based astronomers.

Deciding which projects are worthy of funding is unlikely to win committee members many friends among their colleagues, although Bahcall says his work so far has been relatively hassle-free. He does anticipate that things will change: "Allan [Bromley] has assured me that writing a report like this is a great way to make enemies." Bromley should know—he chaired a similar panel in physics nearly 20 years ago.

Gulf War Conference Casualties

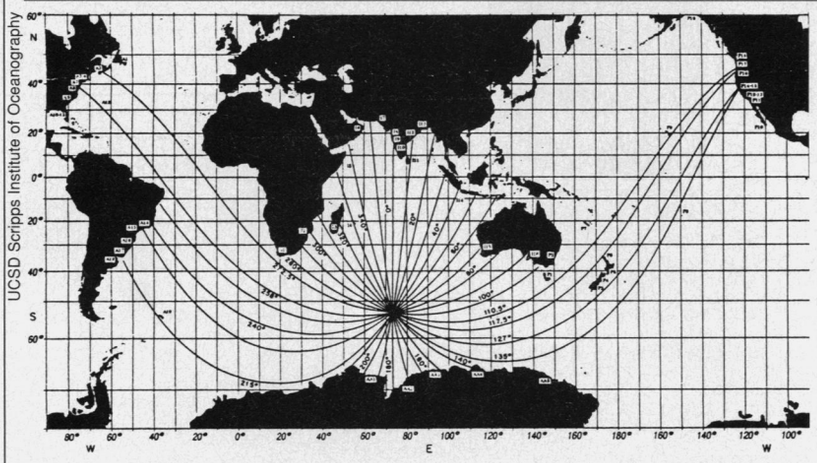
■ In the wake of Saddam Hussein's terrorist threats, federal science agencies have banned all "non-essential" travel by employees and are urging grant recipients to stay home. The result: U.S. scientists are attending fewer international conferences. So far, only a few have been canceled, but more could follow if the fighting in the Gulf continues.

A few hours before the war began, the National Science Foundation postponed a U.S. delegation's January visit to the Soviet Union to share information on science funding and education. Another January meeting, an international conference on environmental mutagenesis in Cairo, was canceled when war threatened. And NIH officials report that a 25-28 February environmental health conference in Budapest—sponsored in part by NIH—may be postponed if key speakers decide to stay home.

Terrorist threats have led scientists to postpone travel.

Conference organizers are less jittery now than during the first few days of war, when the threatened terrorism seemed more imminent. But if terrorism fears heat up again, major events such as the June international AIDS conference planned for Florence, Italy could be in jeopardy.

Sounding Out the Threat of Global Warming



Refracted sound waves emanating from Heard Island.

■ In 1775, when colonial militiamen emptied their muskets at British regulars in Concord, Massachusetts, they fancied they had fired a "shot heard 'round the world." Now a team of oceanographers has done it for real, firing off an underwater acoustical signal that could lay the groundwork for a decade-long experiment to measure global warming in the oceans.

The signal was transmitted for 6 days from a U.S. Navy ship anchored just off Heard Island, a remote and glaciated volcano in the Indian Ocean. Fired 150 meters beneath the sea, the pulse generated sound waves detected by ships off the shorelines of Australia, India, South Africa, Antarctica, New Zealand, Japan, Hawaii, and both coasts of the continental United States.

The American and Australian oceanographers who ran the test are now evaluating the signal to see if it is strong and clear enough to yield useful information. If so, they'll be able to detect temperature changes in ocean basins by measuring how long the pulse takes to traverse them. (Sound moves faster in warm water than cold.) The team will have to take such measurements over a decade or so to detect any long-term warming trend.

Embracing Women With AIDS

■ The National Institutes of Health has been paying greater attention to women's health issues of late—witness the new office of women's health—and the next field likely to be affected is AIDS research. A meeting last December made it clear that there are numerous unanswered research questions relating to HIV-infected women. So NIH has responded by developing a new strategy that will address the special needs of this population.

Take epidemiology, for example. Although the course of HIV infection in high-risk men has been the subject of several studies, relatively little effort has gone into examining the natural history of HIV in women. Then there are a group of treatment issues: whether antiviral drugs work equally well in both sexes, whether therapy can be safely given to women who may become pregnant, and whether HIV infection affects gynecological problems.

In the past, women tended to be studied merely as vectors for the AIDS virus. With its new strategy, NIH seems to be acknowledging that women deserve attention as patients, too.

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