

RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Biotech Firm Holes Up at MBL

The Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) in Woods Hole has been busy changing of late. Its new head, John Burris, has been presiding over management moves to strengthen both the scientific and fiduciary sides of the organization, as well as construction of an \$11 million Marine Resources Center. Now, joining a recent trend in the world of biotech, says Burris, "we're taking on our first 'incubator company.'"

Quite a few institutions—mostly universities—have been taking baby biotech companies under their wings. The benefits are mutual: The fledgling firms don't have to scavenge so hard for start-up funds and they gain access to the host's resources; the host gets a boost in income from rental of its facilities, as well as the benefits of intellectual cross-fertilization with the temporary lodger.

For these reasons MBL is nurturing Tissue Engineering Inc., a startup that develops new biomaterials for prostheses to replace various kinds of bodily tissues. The match is a natural because the new company's founder, former MIT biologist Eugene Bell, is an MBL trustee. And the startup's mission is congruent with biomedical research at Woods Hole, says Burris, who explains that marine life has only begun to be explored as a source for novel compounds—examples are collagen from fish skin, and adhesive proteins found in mussels and barnacles.

Congress Passes Broad NIH Bill

It took 3 years and countless battles over issues such as fetal tissue research and sex surveys, but a House-Senate conference committee has finally approved a comprehensive reauthorization bill for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The bill, vetoed by President Bush last year because it attempted to overturn his ban on fetal tissue research, will enact into law President Clinton's overturning of the fetal tissue ban.

Dozens of other provisions in the bill will also change the NIH landscape. The measure will create a beefed-up Office of AIDS Research that will control the entire \$1 billion-plus NIH AIDS budget. This controversial provision drew fire from individual institute directors, who didn't want another layer of bureaucracy (*Science*, 5 February, p. 753), but Clinton stood behind it. Another contentious clause, which mandates inclusion of women and minorities in clinical trials (*Science*, 7 May, p. 746), also remains in the final bill. In addition, the NIH head is directed to set up an Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research.

Finally, the bill contains a passage that may end another bureaucratic marathon: The long-awaited NIH conflict-of-interest regulations. After 3 years of various delays, NIH now has 6 months to issue final regulations. The clock starts once Clinton signs the legislation, which could happen immediately following Senate passage some time this month.

Comeback for Karisoke

With a little luck—and a few sub-machine guns thrown in for protection—the Karisoke Research Center for mountain gorillas in Rwanda will partially re-open this week, and scientists may be able to resume work as early as July.

The center, founded by Dian Fossey in 1967, has been a critical resource for primatologists, with its long-term studies of the life histories and social behaviors of the endangered mountain gorilla. It closed in February when soldiers from the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded the gorillas' 200-square-kilometer sanctuary. Staff and scientists fled, taking valuable data with them.

But for 6 weeks the gorillas, which have been studied almost continuously since 1967, were left to fend for themselves. Fortunately, hostilities did not last

long: the RPF and the Rwandan government agreed in March to establish the Parc National des Volcans, where Karisoke is located, as a demilitarized zone. "Our [gorilla] trackers were able to resume their follows on 1



Trashed. Rebels and poachers have taken their toll on gorilla research center.

April," says the center's director, anthropologist H. Dieter Steklis of Rutgers University.

Steklis returned to Rwanda in late April to assess the damage. He was gratified to find the population of several hundred gorillas—with the exception of one male who is presumed dead—in surprisingly good health. The center's nine structures, however, are in shambles, and radios, computer equipment, and supplies have been ravished not only by the RPF but by waves of looters and poachers. Steklis, who is negotiating with the RPF for the return of some items, estimates there has been \$50,000 worth of damage.

More worrisome, says Steklis, is the fact that "the poaching has absolutely skyrocketed" while the center sat empty. "That was the first thing we noticed—the lack of wildlife, particularly antelope, which were previously so common," he says. Steklis believes that the poaching will abate once the center's trackers have returned, but they don't want to come back full-time until arrangements have been made for them to be accompanied by armed guards, because many poachers carry automatic weapons. But Steklis is optimistic that, if the ceasefire continues to hold, science will soon resume at Karisoke.

Zoologist Found Guilty on Smuggling Count

A 5-year criminal investigation of a former Smithsonian Institution zoologist has finally reached a conclusion. On 24 May a jury in Alexandria, Virginia, convicted Richard Mitchell—now working at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)—of illegally bringing animal skins into the United States, but it acquitted him of charges stemming from allegations that he used his federal job for personal financial gain. Mitchell plans to appeal, according to his lawyer Thomas Green, who calls the verdict by and large "a fine result...he was acquitted of all of the very serious charges."

Working at the Smithsonian on loan from the FWS, Mitchell got into trouble when he was accused of accepting improper "contributions" from hunters who wanted to shoot game in China, and for helping them kill members of endangered species (*Science*, 27 April 1990, p. 437). He was never formally charged with this crime but was indicted a year ago for tax violations and having a financial conflict of interest as well as for illegal import of wildlife products.

In the trial, the defense succeeded in portraying Mitchell as a conservationist rather than a mercenary hunting guide, according to *The Washington Post*. But he couldn't get off the hook on the smuggling charge. His lawyer claims Mitchell made an oral declaration when he came through customs because he didn't have the proper form, but the jury had been instructed that the law required a written declaration. As a result, he could face stiff punishment at his sentencing now scheduled for 13 August. Maximum penalty is 5 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.