# RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

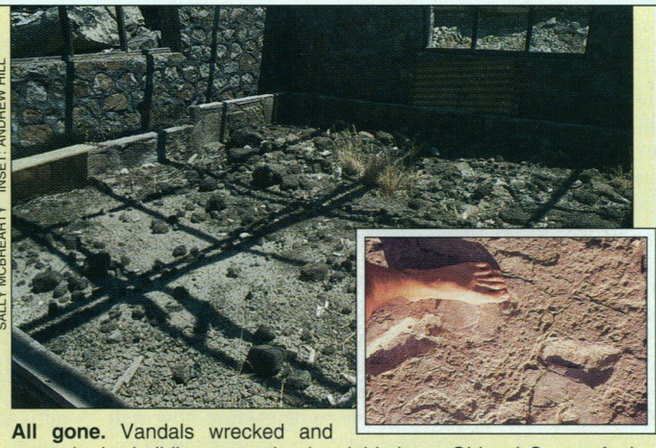
## NIGMS to Go Out On a Limb

The intense competition for funds in biomedicine has fostered a tendency among grant-givers to play it safe, shoving interesting but risky proposals to the back burner while funding the sure bets. Scientists have been complaining about this for years. Now one of the National Institutes of Health, the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS), plans to do something about it.

This fall, says NIGMS acting director Marvin Cassman, the agency hopes to offset the "creeping conservatism" that's afflicted the review process by seeking out unusual grant proposals. In a meeting on 13 September, the NIGMS council adopted a strategy that calls for setting aside 5% of the institute's extramural budget (or $7.5 million to $8 million over the next 2 years) for high-risk, high-payoff research projects. The goal is to provide small, 2-year startup grants of no more than $120,000 each, for ideas that catch the eye of study section reviewers but fail to rank high enough to win funding. Cassman says this will not entail setting up a separate review process; rather, winners will be chosen from the pool of unfunded applicants.

In making the selections, NIGMS will look for proposals "that have been considered by the peer-review group to promise unusually significant results and insights, but which have elements of risk which compromise their likelihood of success," according to a policy statement. Such elements, says NIGMS, include the use of "uncommon or unexplored organisms," "untested methodologies," or "testing of an unconventional hypothesis."

The intent of the 5% set-aside program is clear—"to encourage study sections to do what they want to do anyway," and would do if funds were abundant, says geneticist Leland Hartwell of the University of Washington, Seattle, and chair of the working group that drafted the new strategy. "We want to encourage study sections to consider some more subjective elements" in rating proposals, he says, and to act occasionally on the "gut feeling that something is good science."



SALLY MCBREARTY INSET: ANDREW HILL

**All gone.** Vandals wrecked and ransacked a building protecting hominid site at Olduvai Gorge. And footprints at Laetoli *(right)* are threatened by tree sprouts.

## Hominid Sites Ravaged by Homo Sapiens

The first signs of creatures that walked on two feet and one of the earliest sites of a camp made by human ancestors are slowly being destroyed through vandalism and neglect. So say scientists who recently returned from a brief tour of two of the world's most important sites for the study of human evolution—Olduvai Gorge and Laetoli in Tanzania.

Olduvai holds a circle of stones, thought to be supports for a 1.75-million-year-old windbreak or skin hut, as well as pits that hominids may have dug. Laetoli is the site of a 3.6-million-year-old trail of hominid footprints. Both sites were discovered and excavated by the renowned Leakey family during the 1960s and 1970s. The Leakeys built wooden shelters to preserve some of the Olduvai finds, but despite the presence of Tanzanian government caretakers, the buildings have been extensively vandalized, and artifacts and fossils have disappeared. Rain has eroded many of the pits, and one appears to have been used as a barbeque. "It's absolutely appalling," says Mary Leakey, who was invited by the Tanzanian government last summer to tour some of the sites. "Everything has been ruined." Desmond Clark, a professor emeritus of archeology at the University of California, Berkeley, who accompanied her, adds, "I was horrified."

The state of the Laetoli footprints was equally distressing. Leakey had covered the trail with protective layers of plastic, fine sand, and lava boulders—which turned out to be great for acacia seeds: Fifty-two small trees line the trail today. And last summer, scientists found a small acacia root growing through one of the prints. Researchers fear the fragile prints, preserved in material resembling low-grade concrete, will be lost altogether. A lack of money and uncertainty about how to proceed have stymied efforts to conserve the trail. Tanzanian antiquities officials and staff from the Getty Conservation Institute are discussing a joint preservation project that may start next year. That may come just in the nick of time to halt what Clark calls "one of the great scientific tragedies of our age."

## Research Reactors Dodge a Bullet

Operators of the nuclear reactors at 38 U.S. academic research institutions, stunned in July by the prospect of annual licensing fees of as much as $124,000 (*Science*, 6 August, p. 675), are sighing with relief after the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) agreed last month to reconsider the matter.

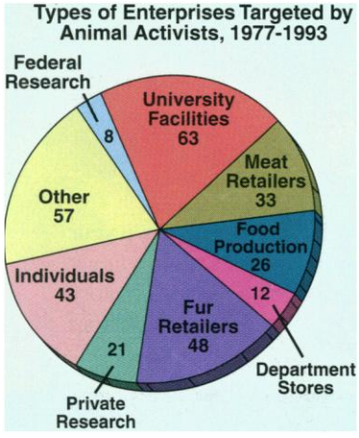
The NRC had sent bills to these institutions after a court ruled that the agency must pay for itself entirely through user fees. Although the NRC had previously exempted research reactors from such levies, the court ruled that it was unfair for commercial power reactors to shoulder all the costs. But the research community rebelled, and in late July, 11 schools joined a Cornell University petition protesting the decision. On 13 September, the NRC agreed to try to satisfy the court's requirement for a clearer showing of "externalized benefits"—that is, educational and research value—of academic reactors if they are to be let off the hook. The agency is expected to publish a proposal by the end of the year exempting academic reactors, and universities will not have to pay user fees pending resolution of the issue.

## Keeping Score on Animal Activism

Could extremist animal rights activism have peaked? According to a new government report* the number of "incidents" involving theft, intimidation, or property damage reached a high in 1987 and 1988, with 53 and 52 incidents, respectively, reported. But the trend has been going down in the '90s. Last year only 11 cases were reported; there have been 4 so far this year.

Congress asked for the report under the new Animal Enterprise Protection Act, passed in 1992 after 4 years of deliberation, which makes it a federal offense to cause damage exceeding $10,000 to an animal enterprise. Prepared by the Departments of Agriculture and Justice, the 32-page report covers the period from 1977 through June of this

*Copies can be obtained from the Department of Justice Public Affairs Office, 10th and Constitution Ave. NW, Washington D.C. 20530.




year, during which there have been 313 incidents, 43% of them involving biomedical research. Costs have exceeded $10,000 in 21 cases, the latest being of arson at Swanson Meats in Minneapolis in November 1992.

Although acts of terrorism appear to be on the wane, the report cautions that "the willingness of animal rights extremists to employ violent and destructive methods...remains strong." It adds: "Perhaps the most disturbing pattern to emerge during the period in question was that individuals and their personal property were targeted with increasing freqency." Examples are threatening letters and acts of vandalism at researchers' homes.

The report also notes that U.S. animal rights extremism has been influenced by activity in the United Kingdom, where the number of violent acts has "consistently far exceeded" those in the United States. After a "prolonged arson campaign" against the fur industry, activists in the U.K. have now turned their attention to the pharmaceutical industry. Whether U.S. activists will follow suit, says the report, "cannot be predicted."

## Apple Growers vs. CBS: TV Wins

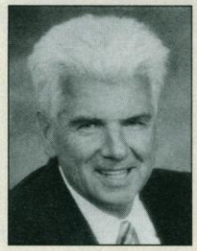
The fiery 4-year debate over the risks of using Alar, a plant growth regulator, to control the ripening of apples, may finally be sputtering out. On 13 September a federal district court in Spokane, Washington, dismissed a suit brought by a group of Northwest apple growers who charged that CBS News's "60 Minutes" had knowingly exaggerated the risks of Alar residues in food. The growers introduced evidence showing that trace amounts of Alar do not create a cancer risk for apple eaters, and argued that CBS's claims to the contrary—broadcast on 26 February 1989—had cost the industry $130 million in sales.

Judge William Fremming Nielsen took a different view. He declined to throw out evidence from the Environmental Protection Agency on Alar's toxicity that was introduced by CBS, saying that although the apple growers called it "fundamentally flawed," it was "sufficiently reliable for this inquiry." He also rejected the argument that "60 Minutes" presented a message that was blatantly false because, he said, people disagree on what the message was. Nielsen accepted CBS's plea for a summary dismissal of the case. "Even if CBS's statements are false," he wrote, "they were about an issue that mattered, cannot be proven as false, and therefore must be protected [by the First Amendment]....A news reporting service is not a scientific testing lab and...should be able to rely on a scientific government report." To pursue the case, he said, "would so chill debate that the freedom of speech would be at risk." The growers have not yet decided whether to appeal.

## Lasker Awards Resume

The Albert Lasker Medical Research Awards—often stepping stones to Nobel Prizes—are back. The three awards, for basic research, clinical research, and public service, are usually given annually but the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation sat out two years, 1990 and 1992, owing to internal rethinkings and reorganizations.

Selected for this year's basic research prize is cell biologist Günther Blobel of Rockefeller University and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Blobel is regarded as the creator of the field of protein translocation and is lauded "for seminal studies eludicating the complex processes by which intracellular proteins are targeted across cell membranes." The clinical research award went to Donald Metcalf of The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne, Australia. Metcalf is the biologist who discovered colony stimulating factors, "thereby opening up new treatments for cancer and other diseases of blood cell formation." Finally, the public service award went to two people: Psychologist Nancy S. Wexler, of Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, who has mobilized research leading to identification of the Huntington's disease gene, and former Florida Congressman Paul Rogers, who was for many years chair of the House health subcommittee. The three awards, each carrying $25,000 in prize money and a heavy dose of prestige, were made at a 1 October ceremony in New York.


Blobel


Metcalf


Wexler

## A Map for Mankind

*Science* readers have seen men and their chromosomes and are none too impressed. Our recent Random Sample Genome Initiative (RSGI), in which we invited readers to suggest additional loci for a published map of the Y chromosome (Why Map Y, 6 August, p. 679), produced a rather dispiriting picture of a lost and slovenly gender, fixated on grown-ups' toys and adolescent humor.

The project has drawn 176 replies from researchers all over the scientific world, garnering responses from the Mayo Clinic all the way to Melbourne Hospital in Australia. Both sexes responded with equal enthusiasm, and, interestingly, it would appear that males and females have pretty much the same view of the gender in question. The trait noted most frequently was the inability to ask for directions, which merited 60 mentions—with labels such as LOST, XIT-L8, Y-ASK, and XSOS. Beer guzzling, with 23 mentions, ranked a distant second. Other commonly observed traits are too vulgar to discuss, but some that we can talk about are: the BBQ locus for outdoor cookery, with 15 mentions including UGH-FIRE GOOD; infatuation with cars (12 citations), and love of the Three Stooges (the NYK-NYK gene), which got 9. Finally, one mention went to "percussion of dashboard while steering with elbows."

There were also a half-dozen admonitory letters. One noted that anyone who circulated a similar map for the XX chromosome most likely "would be out of jobs and without grant support." Another critic said that the map, compiled by Jane Gitschier of the University of California, San Francisco, "constitutes grounds for a sex-harassment suit." Yet not everyone accepted heterosexual males as the only remaining target for sexist humor. A few scientists tried to sneak in some X-mapping by means of Y repressor genes, such as the "shopping repressor gene."