

edited by RICHARD STONE

NIH Biodiversity Grants Could Benefit Shamans

Traditional healers may know how to treat kinfolk with rain forest cures, but they know little about striking deals with pharmaceutical firms. A remedy for their inexperience may now be at hand, however, courtesy of a new alliance between research and nonprofit organizations in the United States and Suriname.

The alliance is an outgrowth of a popular activity these days—culling rain forest flora and fauna for potential new drugs. In one often-cited example, Merck and Costa Rica's National Institute of Biodiversity (INBio) signed a deal in 1991 that promised Costa Rica money and royalties for drugs developed from INBio's "biodiversity prospecting" in exchange for habitat protection.

Now the U.S. government has joined in, and shamans may benefit. Earlier this week, the National Institutes of Health's Fogarty International Center an-

*The five groups are led by University of Arizona, Cornell, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Washington University in St. Louis, and the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research.



Folk remedy. Ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin (left) hopes a new NIH program will enrich traditional healers in Suriname.

nounced a 5-year, \$12.5 million program to fund five International Cooperative Biodiversity Groups.* Like Merck-INBio, the groups would spur conservation as well as prospect in Central and South America and Africa.

But INBio does not trade directly with the locals, and shamans "have gotten the shaft," claims Conservation International (CI) ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin. He intends to change the status quo. "In the event of a drug discovery, the local person who identified the medicinal plant will be eligible for patent and joint-patent

rights," states a document from CI, which will work with Bristol-Myers Squibb, Virginia Polytech, Missouri Botanical Garden, and Suriname's National Herbarium.

Giving shamans patent rights "would be a big step ahead," says World Resources Institute biodiversity expert Walter Reid. To get patent rights, shamans must show knowledge that a plant or other source "is useful for a specific disease," says M. Dianne De Furia, senior director for business development at Bristol-Myers. But methods of validating such claims still must be worked out.

erators, however, it must file an environmental statement to renew its license to burn—a process that includes community input and could last well into 1995.

While the ovens are down, NIH will ship its waste to Balti-

more. NIH estimates this will cost \$1.4 million a year, compared to \$440,000 to burn waste at home. The longer it takes to get the incinerators back up, says an NIH official, "there will be less money to go to the laboratories."

Will U.K. National Labs Go Up for Auction?

Imagine IBM or Bell Labs buying up materials science laboratories run by the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). Such a scheme may seem far-fetched in the United States, but in Great Britain, industrial scientists say it may just happen to their NIST equivalent, the five labs of U.K.'s Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). The reason: DTI science and technology adviser Geoffrey Robinson, said to oppose privatization, resigned last week.

After selling chunks of government-run industry over the past 14 years, the British government has made no secret that its labs may be next. Among the more marketable are DTI labs, which do such NIST-like work as environmental monitoring and setting industrial standards.

DTI minister Michael Heseltine has asked KPMG Peat Marwick to study privatization of the labs. The accounting firm's report is due sometime next year; in the meantime, Heseltine's cost-cutting zeal alienated Robinson, according to the Institute of Professional Managers and Specialists, a union that represents government scientists.

Robinson's departure has left DTI scientists preparing for change. "Privatization would be a death sentence for the lab," warns a scientist at DTI's National Engineering Laboratory.

Burning Questions Threaten NIH Research

Under pressure from local activists, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) will be shutting down three waste incinerators ahead of schedule, a move that will cost the campus—and perhaps its researchers—as much as \$2 million over the next 2 years.

Last month, activists in Bethesda, Maryland, home of the NIH campus, aired concerns in the *Bethesda Gazette* about a potential health threat from dioxins and other residues that escape into the air after medical wastes are burned. NIH officials say the incinerators meet federal and state standards. Nevertheless, they've sped up a scheduled replacement of two incinerators, which will be shut down next week, and improvements to the third. Before NIH can replace the older incin-

Endgame for MicroGeneSys Vaccine Trial?

In a development that may end the MicroGeneSys saga, top federal health officials have drafted a letter to Congress opposing a \$20 million trial of the biotech firm's therapeutic AIDS vaccine. The letter follows legislation that would bring the trial to a halt if the secretary of defense, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) commissioner, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) director were to state objections in writing.

Last year, lobbyists for Meriden, Connecticut-based MicroGeneSys Inc. persuaded Congress to give the Department of Defense (DOD) \$20 million to test the company's gp160 vaccine (*Science*, 23 October 1992, p. 536). Many researchers viewed the appropriation as an end-run around peer review, and they lobbied against it. After meeting with officials at DOD, FDA, and NIH, Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA)

tacked an amendment on the Defense Appropriations bill (which passed last month) that would enable the three agencies to call off the trial, if they found it scientifically weak.

So last month, Ruth Kirschstein (at the time the acting NIH director) and FDA commissioner David Kessler drafted a letter stating their objections and forwarded it to Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, who's expected to approve it.

More of a crapshoot, perhaps, is DOD—the agency has waffled in the past year as to whether to proceed with the trial. However, at an NIH advisory meeting last month, Anthony Fauci, NIH's top AIDS official, said DOD officials concurred with the letter. If Congress gets these sentiments in writing, the \$20 million would roll into DOD's general AIDS research budget.