

Global Initiative to Study Coral Reefs

Coral reefs are under siege. In the last 2 decades, rough weather, climate change, human activity, and other factors have seriously damaged an estimated 10% of the world's reefs. To get a better handle on what's becoming of these fragile shoals, considered bellwethers of global change, three international bodies are laying plans to launch a global network of 165 monitoring sites.

In the early 1980s, marine ecologists linked El Niño weather patterns to reef bleaching, a severing of the coral-algae symbiosis that, if sustained, can kill coral and threaten hundreds of species that take refuge in reefs. Based on these and other observations, the United States and several Caribbean nations began setting up CARICOMP, which now has 26 of the world's 41 coral reef research and monitoring sites. CARICOMP has provided evidence that reefs are still being degraded, says C. Mark Eakin, a program officer at the National

Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

To broaden the inquiry, three bodies—the United Nations Environment Program, the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), and the World Meteorological Organization—want to launch a worldwide monitoring program. As part of an International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI), these organizations hope to have in place by 1998 a network of 165 monitoring stations covering the

world's major reefs. "The idea is to gather the hard, cold facts regarding coral reefs to make sure we aren't exaggerating figures on degradation," says Susan Drake of the U.S. State Department, which is coordinating ICRI.

Eakin says U.S. officials are now in "delicate" negotiations with Japan and other countries to provide start-up funding for the network, a \$7-million-a-year venture that would be operated by universities and institutions located near the reefs.



Probing the depths. Global initiative will study and monitor coral reefs.

Streisand Pays Stealth Visit to NIH

Unbeknownst to the paparazzi, Barbra Streisand paid a quiet visit on 12 June to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to scout locales for the upcoming film version of the searing AIDS play, *The Normal Heart*. Although Streisand's publicist refused to return phone calls, and her film company declined to discuss the trip to Bethesda, Maryland, NIH spokesperson Anne Thomas confirms that the singer-actress-producer did briefly visit and meet with NIH Director Harold Varmus. "The nature of her business was private," says Thomas.

Not that private. Sources tell *Science* that Streisand made no secret of her checking out NIH for the filming of *The Normal Heart*, the play by AIDS activist Larry Kramer that rages at the world for ignoring the early signs of the AIDS epidemic. No word yet on whether Streisand thought

the NIH campus fits the bill for scenes that involve federal AIDS research.

Another Biomedical Thriller in the Works

Biomedical researchers may be feeling the pinch this year, but not makers of biomedical melodramas; for them, business is booming. Take the thriller *Outbreak*, in which a bug akin to the Ebola virus wreaks havoc on the U.S. West Coast. The movie has grossed more than \$66 million in the United States alone, according to its producer, Warner Brothers Inc.—nine times the budget of the special pathogens branch of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which fights the Ebola virus in real life.

Outbreak may be high on the charts, but it's not unique. Slated for a prime-time slot on NBC later this year is another biomedical mystery, *Terminal*, a

made-for-TV movie about oncogene researchers based on the best selling novel by author Robin Cook. Cook says he was inspired to write the tale by the success of his classmate at Columbia University Medical School, National Institutes of Health Director Harold Varmus. Cook, best known for his classic medical mystery, *Coma*, says he was "dismayed" by the public's lack of knowledge about basic research and wrote *Terminal* "to get people who drive buses and work in fast-food restaurants excited about oncogenes."

Terminal's plot is timely: Desperate for funds, a group of cancer researchers turns to swindles and organized crime for financing. "What a way to do science!" weeps the novel's protagonist, a young M.D.-Ph.D. from Harvard: "I wonder if anybody in Washington had any idea what limiting research funding would do to our research establishments?"

Budget II: A Billion Here, a Billion Where?

Last week, it looked as though U.S. science agencies had scored a major victory in President Clinton's proposal to balance the budget by 2005. But what seemed a windfall was actually an error.

As part of its new 1996–2002 budget plan, the White House released a document that calls for an increase of "\$2.5 billion a year by 2002" for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and a \$500 million boost each year for the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Such is not the case. The White House did not mean a \$2.5 billion increase for NIH each year, confess embarrassed Administration officials. Rather, NIH's budget—\$11.3 billion in 1995—would increase gradually, reaching \$13.8 billion in 2002. Still, the increase is "good news," says NIH chief Harold Varmus, who said at a meeting of the Endocrine Society last week that the Administration has pledged to "protect NIH."

As for NSF, the \$500 million increase would be spread over 7 years rather than paid on an annual basis, keeping the foundation just ahead of inflation—slightly better than was offered this spring. The plan also directs NASA to target an additional \$500 million of its funding for science through 2002, enough to keep pace with inflation.

After the mirages in Clinton's budget plan disappear, what's left are signs that the president will defend some science programs. The NASA money, for example, would go largely for environmental research that Republicans are eager to cut. And the plan retains industry-government partnerships that many Republicans want to kill outright. But it's doubtful that any aspect of this second-thoughts budget will impress Congress: Staffers say they are too busy working on their own plans to pay much attention to the president's.