

Getting a Handle on Ecosystem Health

The White House is launching an effort to begin generating a report card on the health of the nation's ecosystems. The project, inspired by Vice President Al Gore and to be carried out by an environmental think tank, is in-

for the report, due out in 18 months, and Heinz is seeking matching funds from private sources. A subsequent study will examine other ecosystems, with the goal of completing the picture by 2001.

Many agencies already do environmental assessments, collecting data on everything from air pollution to coastal erosion rates and endangered species. And the White House Council on Environmental Quality has attempted to produce a broad annual review of the nation's progress on such issues. But these reports have been heavy on anecdotes, observers say, and light on conclusions.

Gore proposed the report card last fall at an ecological monitoring workshop held by the interagency National Science and Technology Council. If it proves useful, says White House environmental aide Jerry Melillo, "my vision is that this [project] would continue for decades."

Japan Loosens Grip on Quake Data

The Japanese government, which has closely guarded seismic data, now wants citizens and scientists to know if there's a whole lotta shakin' going on.

Last week, the Japanese Meteorological Agency (JMA) said it plans to begin announcing, in close to real time, any observations of anomalous seismic phenomena from its network of seismic instruments concentrated in the Tokai region west of Tokyo. Until now, most of the data on earthquakes, crustal strain and tilt, ground-water levels, and other activity have been shared only with a panel of six nongovernment seismologists tasked with recommending when a warning should be issued for the Tokai region, where a major earthquake is believed to be overdue. Everyone else has had to be satisfied with the location and magnitude of earthquakes after they have occurred.

The new policy on seismic anomalies, which will include some interpretation for the public, brings the agency in line with practices in other countries. "It's a significant step," says Masayuki Kikuchi, a seismologist at the University of Tokyo's Earthquake Research Institute. Kikuchi says it will allow seismic-process modelers to check their work against observational data.

Koichi Uhira, JMA's deputy director of earthquake prediction information, says the agency hopes by the end of the year to release details on how the observational data will be made available to researchers—possibly, he says, on the agency's Web site.

Academy Prepares to Open Up Committees

Under judicial pressure, the National Academy of Sciences intends to open its door a little wider to outside scrutiny—but only by a crack. The NAS decided to revise its policy on public access to the work of committees advising the government after losing another round in a long legal war with animal-rights and environmental groups. (See p. 900.)

The academy's latest setback came on 6 May when the U.S. District Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit, denied NAS's appeal for a rehearing by the full court of a decision by a three-member panel. The panel had found that the NAS should have followed the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) in forming an expert group to revise an animal-care guide (*Science*, 17 January, p. 297). The NAS now intends to appeal to the Supreme Court, says William Colglazier, executive officer of the academy's operations arm, the National Research Council (NRC). He thinks the court will decide this fall whether to hear the case.

But NAS officials are already promising to open up processes that have come under fire for being too secretive and biased. Colglazier says the academy plans to allow the public into committee meetings where panel members are gathering information, and to require panelists to discuss publicly their potential biases. In addition, he says, the NRC may stop using committees for some studies. Instead, it might rely on an outside scientist and NRC staff to prepare a draft study, then submit the text to a rigorous review. This would do away with the public-access requirement, for, as Colglazier points out, "FACA only applies to committees." The new policy could be approved as early as next week.

The appeals court must now decide whether to ask a lower court to grant relief to the plaintiffs or wait for a Supreme Court decision.



JAMES C. LEOPOLD/USFWS

Time for a checkup. White House project will set a baseline for measuring progress in protecting U.S. ecosystems.

tended to provide impartial data to help policy-makers as they debate environmental issues in future years.

The first stage of the study will focus on forests, croplands, and coastal and marine ecosystems. It will be organized by the Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment of Washington, D.C., which will assemble a team of scientists and economists from the government, universities, environmental groups, and industry. Federal agencies have pledged \$500,000

Labour Names a Science Minister

The British Labour government, which swept into office last week with the largest number of seats it has ever held in Parliament, has picked John Battle as its new science minister. Battle had served as Labour's voice for science policy in the past, although energy was his last job before the election, and housing and employment have been at the center of his political concerns. His selection as minister was unexpected.

Tony Blair, the new prime minister, had relied on Adam Ingram as science spokesperson during the election campaign, and many thought Ingram would get the science minister's job. Instead, he was appointed to a post in the Northern Ireland Office. "We've no hint of why this has happened," says

Oxford physiologist Denis Noble, a leader of the lobby group Save British Science. But Noble says that his group will be "delighted" to work with Battle.

Researchers may be disappointed, however, by the Blair government's decision not to create a new Cabinet-level post for science and technology. Blair has stuck to Labour's original plan, refusing to reverse a decision 2 years ago that placed the science minister at a junior level within the Department of Trade and Industry.

But the department's head and Cabinet member, Margaret Beckett, raised hopes that science might be given high priority this week when she announced that she would have "special responsibility" for science and technology.