SCIENCESCOPE

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USMAB

Sovereignty threat? House bill would end U.S. role in UN "biosphere reserves" program.

Lawmakers Target Biosphere Program

Back when few people had heard of ideas like biodiversity and sustainable development, the United Nations set up a voluntary network of ecology research sites to explore ways to use natural resources without destroying them. But several House members claim the 29-year-old UN Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program impinges on the rights of property owners, and they want to pull the plug on U.S. participation.

MAB's 339 "biosphere reserves" include 47 sites in the United States, most of them national parks or wilderness areas. Each reserve comprises a core protected area and the adjacent land managed for uses such as recreation or forestry. The combination allows visiting researchers to do comparative studies, for instance, on minimizing the impact of tourism on biodiversity.

But Representative Don Young (R–AK) claims the reserves trample on citizens' rights by influencing nearby land-use decisions. Young's resources committee is considering a bill that would remove all 47 U.S. reserves from MAB in 3 years unless each one obtained congressional approval. A similar bill nearly passed the House last fall.

If the program is killed, says the Smithsonian Institution's Thomas Lovejoy, a former USMAB chair, "this inherently sensible scientific approach to resource management would be lost."

The reserves aren't the only worry for USMAB, run by the State Department: Representative Tom Coburn (R–OK) is leading an effort to kill the program's $1.2 million budget, which comes from 14 federal agencies and also funds peer-reviewed research. This month, the House passed authorization bills that bar the National Science Foundation and NASA from funding MAB. Even if those bills don't become law, an aide for Coburn says he hopes to persuade spending committees to cut MAB money.

U.K. Revamps University Research Grants

Britain's Medical Research Council (MRC) is planning major changes in the way it funds projects in universities, pushing researchers to forge collaborations or else see their funds dry up.

The MRC, which now spends $110 million per year on short-term project grants and related projects to individual university scientists, plans to replace its old funding scheme with five new categories that will focus funding on multidisciplinary teams large enough to create a critical mass. At the core are two categories—Cooperative Group Grants and Centre Grants—which will fund about 100 teams. Another two categories will help universities and researchers build strengths to compete for group grants. A fifth category will continue to fund individual investigators with small grants, but only those with a proven track record.

The new categories, which begin in 1998, will cut administration costs by reducing the number of projects that undergo peer review. The present subject-based grant panels will be scrapped in favor of a single advisory board for initial scientific assessment of proposed projects. A second board will then examine how well the projects fit the new multidisciplinary mission.

The changes "allow universities both to build on existing research strengths and provide opportunities to develop expertise in new areas," an MRC spokesperson says. But the new plan poses a threat to funding for small single groups. As the spokesperson says: "They should think about getting themselves into a co-op."

Germany May Relax Genome Data Policy

Following a meeting in Bonn on 26 May, German science officials appear likely to defuse a dispute enveloping the country's new genome research program. According to Knut Bauer of the research ministry, a clause granting industrial contributors 3 months of exclusive access to sequence data before they are put on the Internet may soon be dropped in favor of immediate release.

Such a decision would represent a victory for academic scientists. At a February meeting in Bermuda, researchers from the world's major sequencing centers strongly objected to the German policy, which they said violates the principle of immediate data release endorsed the year before by all participants (*Science*, 23 May, p. 1189). They also threatened to exclude Germany from their international genome collaboration.

The controversial policy was a response to what some experts see as more favorable patent laws in the United States. But now German leaders appear to have set their patent concerns aside. At the Bonn meeting, according to several participants, key genome scientists, industry representatives, and ministry officials agreed that the country must avoid a potentially disastrous conflict over data sharing. "Our top priority is to stay in the international scientific community in this field," says Bauer. And "elimination" of privileged access for industry looks like the best way, he says. This thinking was influenced in part by a talk last week with U.S. genome program chief Francis Collins, Bauer adds.

Andre Rosenthal, who coordinates Germany's planned genomic sequencing effort, left the meeting hopeful that the policy will be reversed. But he worries that the issue will arise again for other genomic data, such as cDNA sequences. "I think we might see this battle fought over and over," he warns.

Gingrich Proposes Biodiversity Year

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA), who favors grand strategies in politics, wants scientists to think big about biodiversity.

Speaking last week in Washington, D.C., at an international meeting on oceans and security, the Speaker challenged his audience to come up with a plan for an International Biodiversity Year (IBY) to study the planet's living systems. Gingrich compared the idea to the International Geophysical Year of 1958–59, a hugely successful collaboration to study Earth's physical features. "Be bold," he said, "push the envelope. ... It's our job [in Congress] to be practical."

The IBY concept, says an aide, stems from conversations with scientists about the gaps in our knowledge of Earth's species and the potential value of new products derived from nature. One of Gingrich's advisers, Cornell biologist Tom Eisner, calls it "a useful concept for uniting disparate factions and raising consciousness" about the need for biodiversity research. Environmentalists see an IBY as a chance to jump-start other activities—for example, an international project called Diversitas, which Stanford biologist Hal Mooney describes as "a region-by-region survey of what we have and what we've lost," is targeted to begin in 2001. And Peter Raven, head of the Missouri Botanical Gardens, sees IBY as a useful prod for U.S. ratification of the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity.

Paying for IBY won't be easy in an era of tight budgets. "The first question my bosses would ask is, 'In lieu of what mandated program?' " says one federal research official. But when it comes to finding money for new ideas, it can't hurt to have a powerful advocate like the Speaker.