RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

World's Oldest Plant?

A team of Tasmanian botanists claims to have found the world's oldest living plant—a vast, low-growing, one-of-a-kind shrub born more than 43,000 years ago. If their conclusions are accurate, this *Lomatia tasmanica*, a member of Proteaceae family otherwise known as King's holly, would be more than three times as old as the previous record holder, a 13,000-year-old box huckleberry in Pennsylvania.

The leader of the research team, Rene Vaillancourt, a plant geneticist at the University of Tasmania, says the plant ranges over an area of 1.2 km. Its age—about 43,600 years—was estimated using carbon-14 dating of charcoal found along with fossilized leaf fragments. The fragments themselves were too fragile to date, he says.

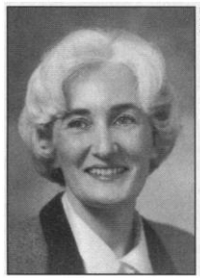
Vaillancourt admits that there is no direct evidence linking the plant fossil to the living representative. But he says the time it would take for the slow-growing organism, which scientists have been monitoring for several years, to spread so broadly in the nutrient-poor soil is consistent with the isotope dating. A report on the discovery is to appear next January in the *Australian Journal of Botany*.

Discovered in 1934, the plant is the only known example of its species. "We're trying to keep the exact location secret," says Vaillancourt, noting only that it lives in a rainforest in the protected World Heritage Area in southwest Tasmania. It has shiny green leaves, 10 to 20 centimeters in length, dissected like other hollies; red flowers that bloom off the leaf tips; and about 200 stems. This specimen is sterile, propagating itself by sending out rhizomes, or roots.

Frank S. Santamour Jr., a geneticist at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., calls the discovery "fascinating." But, he says, scientists would have to show a conclusive connection between the fossil and the living plant before its age could be determined. Vaillancourt says all they can do at this point is try to get a better idea of the plant's growth rate.

NAE Puts the Focus On Women

The National Academy of Engineering (NAE) is laying plans for a project to attract more women into engineering. The brainchild of NAE's new president, William Wulf, it will feature conferences for students and a multimedia Web site.



NAE

E. Gail de Planque

The project, called "Celebration of Women in Engineering: Dispelling Myths, Profiling Excellence," is only in the seed stage, says NAE program officer Janet Hunziker. The $200,000 AT&T-funded project was to be launched at a 24 July meeting by a committee headed by physicist and NAE member E. Gail de Planque, a Potomac, Maryland–based consultant and former commissioner on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. "I feel pretty strongly about the fact that we need to take an aggressive position" with regard to getting more women into engineering, says Wulf. Only 2% (42) of the NAE's 2000-odd members are women, although they now make up almost 8% of the work force and 20% of undergraduate enrollment in engineering.

As for myths that need dispelling, Wulf says: "Too often the image of the engineer is some guy wearing jeans and boots knocking down a mountain to build a road." In fact, he says, engineering means designing things with features of particular interest to women—things that are not only functional but healthy, easy-to-use, safe, and environmentally sound.

De Planque says the committee is drawing on the cumulative wisdom of other women-in-science efforts and hopes to come up with "something that really provides value added." Plans are to hold a series of conferences for female students interested in engineering that Wulf hopes will be "life-transforming" events.

The new Web site—to be produced by a computer company whose identity is as yet undisclosed—is also supposed to be life-transforming. "I've cried at a movie; I've never cried at a Web site," Wulf says he told the company. "Can you make me cry at this Web site?"

Brown Doctor Protests Firing

A spat between occupational-health physician David Kern and his employer, Memorial Hospital of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and his academic home, Brown University's School of Medicine, has grown increasingly toxic after the university failed to back him in a dispute over his work on illnesses at a local textile plant. Kern, whose job will end in 1999, has filed a complaint with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) alleging he is being punished as a whistleblower.

The trouble began when Kern reported, at a conference this spring, on an outbreak of interstitial pneumonia in nine employees at a Rhode Island textile firm (*Science*, 25 April, p. 523). The firm, Microfibres Inc. of Pawtucket, claims Kern presented the data in violation of a confidentiality agreement he signed while acting as a company consultant. In April, the hospital announced plans to close the occupational-health clinic Kern directs and in May told Kern he would not be reappointed. The hospital cites budgetary pressures for its decisions, but Kern says it's retaliation for his presentation.

Kern says he violated no agreement because he did not name the company or divulge trade secrets. In May he appealed to the university, arguing that the hospital couldn't terminate an official medical school program without the school's approval. But outgoing Brown President Vartan Gregorian responded that the program Kern ran for 11 years "was never a formally approved or integral part of the Medical School."

Scores of occupational-health professionals have written to Brown in protest. It's clear Kern "was punished for presenting his scientific work," says William Beckett, a professor of environmental medicine at the University of Rochester in New York. It's "tremendously disappointing," he adds, that "a world-renowned university has not done what we all expected ... in protecting the academic freedom of one of its faculty members." An OSHA ruling is expected within the year.

EMBL Welcomes Portugal

Portugal has joined the 15-country European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) as part of an effort by the Heidelberg, Germany–based lab to expand its influence throughout Europe.

At its meeting last week, EMBL's Council unanimously accepted a request by the Portuguese government to become the first new member in 8 years. In separate negotiations, the Swiss-based Louis-Jeantet Foundation for Medicine is to collaborate with EMBL to establish two annual 4-year fellowships for young researchers in Eastern Europe. The fellows will be part of EMBL's international Ph.D. training program that makes 25 awards a year to students from member states.