edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Defining "Science" for the People

Give physicists a few minutes and they can produce a definition of general relativity; give them a few years and they should be able to define "science." Right? Wrong.

Three years ago, physicist Robert Park of the University of Maryland, College Park, persuaded the American Physical Society (APS) that it needed a "hit squad" of scientific heavies to swat down phony science reports—from occasional electromagnetism scare stories to sightings of Kennedy faces on the moon—as they arise. But before you can say what science isn't, you have to be able to say what it is, says Park, APS's publicist. So the society's public affairs panel laboriously crafted a definition. But after reviewing the statement last month, the APS council swatted it down. "Nobody liked it," says Park. "It even wound up confusing a lot of my scientific colleagues."

The APS declined to release the definition, but according to APS President Andrew Sessler, former director of Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, the statement should make three points: that science is based on empiricism; that it requires "open exchange of data and ideas" to reproduce and verify findings; and that science's "devotion to an attitude of skepticism" nurtures a self-correcting mechanism.

APS's latest tack is to seek out other societies that could join the effort to arrive at a "consensus" definition. The hope is to come up with a half-page of crystalline prose that the council can approve when it meets in the fall.

Canadian Science Attachés at Risk

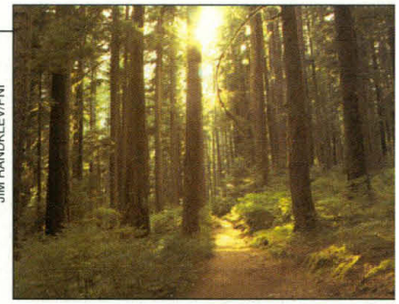
Canadian officials were hedging last weekend after news trickled out that the Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade (DFAIT) wants to cut costs by chopping the science and technology counselor positions at its embassies in Washington, Tokyo, London, Bonn, Paris, and Brussels.

Critics say eliminating the posts would be folly. They are a "critical strategic investment," says Arthur Carty, head of the National Research Council (NRC), Canada's in-house research agency. "For Canada to be pulling out is just ridiculous." In a letter written earlier this year, Carty and two other council presidents urged DFAIT Deputy Minister Robert Wright to reconsider the decision. Wright responded that S&T issues fall outside DFAIT's "core" activities of "international business development and trade and economic policy."

But that was before the plan became public. Now DFAIT appears to be backpedaling. Spokesperson Dexter Bishop says the department has no plans to eliminate "scientific capability" at its embassies. And other sources say that one option being discussed is to have NRC or other bodies pick up the tab for Canada's science counselors.

Biologists Rally for Forest Law

Prominent biologists have thrown their weight behind a proposed law that many see as a "last chance" to save the last 5% of the U.S.'s original virgin forests. The bill would outlaw clear-cutting in any federal forest and ban logging and roadmaking on 7 million hectares of mostly old-growth forest. A star-studded cast, led by Harvard entomologist E. O. Wilson, appeared on Capitol Hill this week to release a letter signed by Stuart Pimm, Peter Raven, and 600 other scientists in support of the bill.



JIM RANDKLEV/PNI

Vanishing breed. Virgin forest in Salduc national park, Washington.

"This is the most clear-cut, decisive, and [scientifically] well-supported legislation that I've ever seen," said Wilson. It promises "more protection for biodiversity in one stroke than any other legislation." The Act to Save America's Forests, sponsored by Robert Torricelli (D–NJ) in the Senate and Anna Eshoo (D–CA) in the House, would make preserving biodiversity the mission of agencies like the Forest Service and would create a panel of scientists to guide management policies.

Republicans have recently come close to passing "forest health" bills that would allow burning and logging of dying trees to ward off fire and disease. But critics see that as an excuse for more logging. "There is no forest health crisis," said Arthur Partridge, a retired forestry professor at the University of Idaho. He said less than 1% of trees are lost per year to pests, disease, and fire.

Torricelli noted at the press conference that the bill (S. 977) would make for big changes in logging policies. President Clinton has put a temporary moratorium on new road construction in roadless areas, but that ban is under constant threat of being overturned. And clear-cutting is allowed in places like Alaska's Tongass National Forest.

The bill has attracted 91 cosponsors in the House and five in the Senate since it was introduced last summer, but Gary Meffe, editor of *Conservation Biology*, says getting it passed will be "a long, grueling process." For now, "this is building support and educating."

Out of Prison, Gajdusek Heads for Europe

Scientists in half a dozen countries have been vying to work with Nobel laureate D. Carleton Gajdusek, who was released from prison this week. He immediately jetted off to Europe, where he has enough offers to keep him busy indefinitely.

Gajdusek shared the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine in 1976 for his groundbreaking research into kuru, a brain disease that affected New Guinea tribespeople. In 1996, the virologist was charged with sexually abusing a teenaged Micronesian boy living in his home (*Science*, 12 April 1996, p. 203). After pleading guilty in February 1997 as part of a plea bargain, Gajdusek resigned as chief of NIH's Laboratory of Central Nervous System Studies and was later sentenced to 18 months in prison.

AP PHOTO

Gajdusek

Now that he's free, Gajdusek "wishes to roll around among different labs like Diogenes in a barrel," says Georg Klein, of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, where Gajdusek is expected to show up in July. Then, in September, he will begin a 6-month visiting professorship at the Department of Human Retrovirology of the Academic Medical Center in Amsterdam, invited by virologist and AIDS researcher Jaap Goudsmit. Says Goudsmit, who was a postdoc in Gajdusek's lab from 1979 to 1981, "I'm very fond of him. He is still very smart, and he knows a lot about viruses. It will be wonderful to have him."

Gajdusek also has invitations from labs in Norway, Finland, France, Germany, and Israel. Ephraim Katzir, former Israeli president and a biochemist at the Weizmann Institute for Science in Rehovot, says Gajdusek has promised to visit. "He is an excellent scientist," says Katzir. "We are not interested in his private life."

Gajdusek was not available for comment. His lawyer, Mark J. Hulkower of the Washington, D.C., firm of Steptoe and Johnson, says Gajdusek's plans are confidential but confirms his client "will travel the world and dedicate his life to science." Klein says if anything, Gajdusek's time in jail has enhanced his value. "He was doing an incredible amount of reading and writing. … I think it was probably the most concentrated and productive time of his life."