

RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Dutch Ecology Under Attack

In a cost-saving move, Leiden University in the Netherlands has proposed excising five sections—including two internationally prominent research groups—from its Institute of Evolutionary and Ecological Sciences. Rumors of the plan have already triggered howls of outrage from critics.

With its population of science students dwindling, the school has been forced to trim its math and science budget by 20%. Although math, chemistry, and physics have suffered the biggest enrollment drops, a strategic plan unveiled last week calls for evolution and ecology to bear the brunt of the cuts. Among the groups to be axed are animal ecology, led by Jacques van

Alphen, and Hans Metz's theoretical evolutionary biology group. Both are known for their research on speciation, host-parasite relationships, and evolutionary dynamics, says Stephen Stearns of Yale University, one of more than 100 scientists to fire off letters of protest to the Leiden administration. "Many of us have sent our best students" there, Stearns wrote. The decision is "shortsighted and gravely mistaken," adds evolutionary biologist Russell Lande of the University of California, San Diego.

The Leiden cuts mirror a national trend favoring molecular



Suffering for Leiden ecology institute.

biology over other fields, says Metz. Ecology funding at Groningen University—the country's other top center for ecology—is dwindling as well, he points out. A Leiden spokesperson responds that although some good research may be lost, the plan will help stimulate interdisciplinary research.

Megabucks for Stanford

Yet another university has received a stupendous windfall this year: The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation announced last week that it would give \$400 million to Stanford University. In announcing the gift, Hewlett Foundation chair Walter Hewlett said the gift "was like a final bequest to Stanford from Bill Hewlett," his father, who died in January at the age of 87.

Three-quarters of the gift will go to the School of Humanities and Sciences, where it will endow professorships and graduate student fellowships and seed a \$1 billion fund-raising campaign. The other \$100 million is for programs in Stanford's 5-year, \$1 billion Campaign for Undergraduate Education, which kicked off last fall.

The gift is "just spectacular. It's breathtaking," says Humanities and Sciences dean Malcolm Beasley. "It's difficult to get large gifts for the core part of the university."

William Hewlett and fellow Stanford alum David Packard founded the eponymous computer company in 1936. Previous gifts to Stanford from the two families total nearly \$400 million.

The editor of the *British Medical Journal* (*BMJ*) has threatened to quit his professorship at the University of Nottingham if the university fails to return a \$5.4 million grant it has received from the British American Tobacco company.

Nottingham says it is abiding by an agreement between universities and the U.K. charity Cancer Research Campaign that sanctions university acceptance of tobacco money so long as it is not for health-related research. Nottingham officials plan to use the funds to help finance a research center on corporate social responsibility.

But the *BMJ* has objected strongly to the arrangement. In an editorial in the 5 May issue, editor Richard Smith argued that the tobacco industry had "systematically, and often covertly, tried to undermine the science" linking tobacco and diseases such as lung cancer. By accepting the cash, Smith wrote, Nottingham has "crossed a dangerous line. ... [The] university looks either grasping, naive or foolish." The journal has invited its readers to vote on whether the university should keep the cash. If they agree with Smith, he will quit his professorship in protest. His principled stand won't entail much sacrifice. He says he has spent even less time on campus than the 4 or 5 days a year called for when he was appointed in 1994—and he hasn't been paid since an initial \$425 check.

BMJ Fumes Over Tobacco Grant



Many parts of the former free-fire zone shelter valuable wildlife.

From Death Strip to Lifeline

For 3 decades after World War II, Germany was divided by a 1400-kilometer-long no-man's-land that ran down the country like an ugly scar—a "death strip" guarded by mines, attack dogs, and machine guns.

Today, chunks of the once verboten zone still harbor rare animals and plant species, and German officials are stepping up efforts to turn these Cold War refugia into a string of nature preserves.

The environment ministry and the Federal Office for Nature Protection last month announced that they will spend \$325,000 on a study aimed at evaluating and expanding the existing "biotop," or green band, of 174 reserves that currently cover more than half of the old no-man's-land and adjacent security zones. Ultimately, they'd like to protect 85% in a series of preserves that would be "a milestone for European nature protection," says deputy environment minister Gila Altmann.

The idea is resisted by some farmers and others who want to use the land. If the government effort fails, says Volker Lüderitz of the German conservation group BUND, development may threaten as much as half of what he considers to be Europe's "most important biotop."