Jewels in the Crown III: Tropical Research Center

Since the 1920s, the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) in Panama has been a favorite study site for tropical researchers. STRI currently operates nine field stations in Panama that focus on everything from cloud forests to coral reefs. More than 600 visiting scientists flock to the centrally located Barro Colorado Island facility in a typical year, often lured by the chance to work shoulder-to-shoulder with STRI's 33 principal investigators. "There is no place like it; the quality of their investigators and their publication rates are remarkable," says Chris Peterson, a coral reef researcher at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, who did postdoctoral work at STRI in the late 1980s.

STRI's budget has been essentially flat at about $15 million over the last 3 years, with about a third of the total coming from private donations and contracts. Despite the financial stagnation, however, outsiders perceive STRI to be thriving. A five-member visiting committee that graded STRI late last year concluded, "Among hundreds of tropical research institutions around the world, STRI is undeniably the best," singling out research in ecology, evolution, animal behavior, and anthropology for special praise.

That may be due to something that many observers say the National Museum of Natural History lacks: energetic and consistent leadership. Tropical biologist Ira Rubinoff, widely regarded as a model of the politically savvy scientist, has led STRI for 28 years.

–D.M.

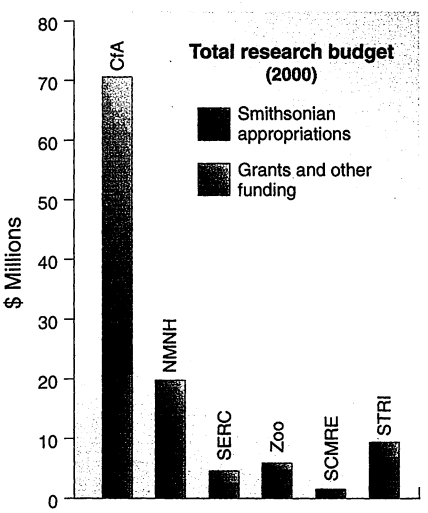
Coral reef life. STRI made its mark studying both marine and terrestrial tropical biodiversity.

argued that better science would result if scientists didn't have to divide their time between public programs and research, and they could develop more fruitful collaborations with Smithsonian colleagues interested in the same themes. "If we want to stop withering on the vine," adds Coates, "we have to do something about it by pruning ourselves, reorganizing ourselves, and getting out into the private sector."

But the council scientists left the meeting shaking their heads. Many say they support the idea of discipline-based centers of excellence, but some question the wisdom of restructuring the entire science program to create them. "I think [revitalizing science] requires a more nuanced approach than reorganizing the structure," says Zeder. STRI evolutionary biology Mary Jane West-Eberhard agrees, suggesting that stable funding and "strong leadership that can distinguish between delayed payoffs and deadwood" are the solutions.

Many found the move to divide science from public programs especially troubling if it separates scientists from the building of exhibits. "There needs to be the sense of obligation to the public; they need to work with the public to engender public enthusiasm [for science]," says Dilcher. Adds Conrad Labandeira, a Smithsonian paleobiologist, "It would be an unmitigated disaster."

In the face of these criticisms, Small, O'Connor, and Coates decided not to release details of the impending reorganization until the Smithsonian's Board of Regents had a chance to review it at its next meeting in early May. Rumors filled the void left by their silence, fanning concerns about the future and about Small's true intentions. It didn't help that Small suspended the procedure by which scientists get promotions and raises, expecting in May to implement a new one based on the reorganization.



Federal trough. NASA funding makes the astrophysical observatory the big breadwinner.

The announcement on 4 April of the planned closure of the CRC and the SCMRE provided the spark that ignited this powder keg. Small and zoo chief Spelman justified the cuts, which were included in the Bush Administration's budget submission to Congress, as being necessary to free up funds for higher priority efforts, including refurbishing and updating exhibits and programs at the zoo. Spelman noted that some of the work of the CRC would be transferred to the zoo's main site in Washington, D.C.

Over the next several weeks, however, congressional representatives, scientific organizations, and individual researchers stood up to defend these centers. Many scientists felt that the cuts were further evidence that Small regarded science as a low priority. "Small has articulated support for science, but at the same time, we don't see support," says NMNH paleontologist Doug Erwin.

The heated rhetoric continued until, on the eve of the regents' meeting, Small withdrew the proposal to close the CRC, saying the reasons had been misinterpreted. Small provided the regents (and eventually the press) with a white paper called "Science for the 21st Century," again laying out the rationale for centers of excellence and focusing on areas of science the Smithsonian does best. But the document provided no details of how the science would be structured or what would be cut.

The regents approved the overall concept. Given the funding trends, "we can't be all things to all people," says one regent, microbiologist Manuel Ibáñez of Corpus Christi, Texas. The details will now be worked out in conjunction with the blue-ribbon committee. Coates expects the group to consider not just a reorganization strategy proposed by Small but also a plan drawn up by the scientists themselves. And although everyone is anxious to have Smithsonian life settle down, he expects the committee's work to take at least to the end of the year.

Natural History may have to face the changes without a leader. In June, Fri submitted his resignation. He declines to discuss his reasons, but in a terse statement he issued at the time, he said "I do not feel that I can make [the] commitment enthusiastically" to the impending changes.

All along, Small has argued that the Smithsonian's science lacks visibility. That's now changed: Key members of Congress are now acutely aware of the Smithsonian's science programs, and last week a Senate committee blocked the closure of the SCMRE. If Congress eventually produces a more generous budget for science, that may be one of the lasting benefits of the past year's noisy recriminations. **–ELIZABETH PENNISI**

With reporting by Andrew Lawler, David Malakoff, and Erik Stokstad.

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