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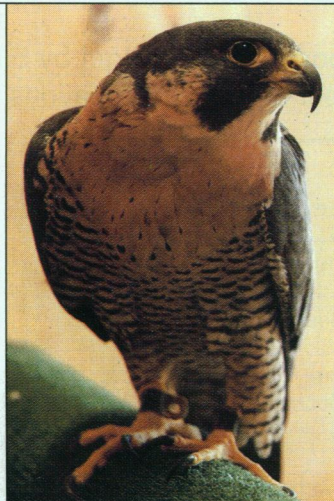
Powerful Lay Body to Oversee U.K. Genetics?

A science committee of the U.K. House of Commons earlier this week issued a report calling for the creation of a high-level panel with broad powers to regulate gene therapy and monitor genetic screening programs.

The report from the House of Commons' Science and Technology Committee endorses genome research, citing potentially "enormous benefits for health care." Nevertheless, the report calls for more oversight from a "Human Genetics Commission" that would be made up mainly of laypeople. "Only a minority of [commission] members should have a professional or financial interest" in genome research, the report states.

The panel also recommends that the European Patent Convention "be redrawn to allow patents to be challenged on the grounds that their claims go too wide." According to the report, "only a combination of a gene and a known utility ... should be patentable in the context of that utility."

"They take a commendably balanced view of the issues," says Walter Bodmer, director general of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund in London. "The recommendations should be taken seriously," he says.



ROBERT L. MESTAUS/FWS

Full-fledged comeback? Biologists are debating plan to drop peregrine falcon from endangered list.

Peregrine Falcon: Saved or Endangered?

A proposal by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to remove the peregrine falcon from the endangered species list is under fire from some biologists, who say the plan fails to take into account the fragility of the bird's population.

In June, FWS reported that the peregrine falcon—placed on the endangered species list in 1970—has recovered to a stable population level. FWS attributes the comeback to restrictions on the use of DDT and other pesticides linked to reproductive disorders in wildlife, and to the release of captive-bred birds.

The proposal, however, has

ruffled the feathers of some biologists working to restore the bird's population. Delisting the species would be "too much too soon," says Jerry Craig, a raptor biologist for Colorado's Division of Wildlife, which released more than 500 captive birds between 1974 and 1989. Craig says that many of the 122 falcons now accounted for in Colorado are "still very young and need to be monitored for a few years to see if they can successfully reproduce and maintain the population."

Indeed, a sign that all is not well comes from New Mexico, where falcon hatchlings have declined 39% since 1988. According to Department of Game and Fish Director Gerald Maracchini, "It would be unjustifiable to propose delisting the peregrine without understanding recent population trends in reproduction."

FWS, on the other hand, used a traditional measure of population health—breeding pairs—in its delist proposal. FWS condor program chief Robert Mesta points out that the recovery plan drafted in the early 1980s called for 368 breeding pairs in the western United States. An FWS survey in 1994 counted 783 pairs. "The current evidence warrants a real serious look at delisting this species," Mesta says. FWS is taking comments on its proposal until 30 August.

Space Rescue

A House panel earlier this week rejected a plan from Representative Jerry Lewis (R-CA) to close three National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) centers and cancel the \$3.5 billion Cassini probe to Saturn (*Science*, 14 July, p. 156). Instead, the House appropriations committee voted on 18 July to cut \$332 million from NASA's Mission to Planet Earth. The measure, which gives NASA almost \$600 million less than the \$14.2 billion White House request, is expected to go to the House floor next week.

Animal Research Bills Threaten Polish Science

The animal rights movement, strong in Germany and other Western European countries, is drifting eastward. Legislators in Poland are considering two bills that would clamp down on the use of animals in research.

Both bills state that "animal experiments are acceptable only in cases when the desired scientific aims cannot be obtained in any other way." Most researchers wouldn't quibble with that. However, the bills, written with input from a group called "Animals," would also require scientists to care for animals—rather than euthanize them—after an experiment is finished. One of the bills goes even further, calling for the creation of a data bank of studies conducted on animals worldwide that Polish scientists would have to consult before performing an experiment. The bill would prohibit experiments "identical or very similar" to those in the data bank.

If either bill passes in its current form, their provisions could become "the biggest challenge" to doing research—barring a total market collapse, says Malgorzata Kossut, a neurobiologist at the Nencki Institute of Experimental Biology in Warsaw. To prevent this outcome, Stefan Kasicki, chair of Nencki's bioethics committee, is working with legislators to change the bills' language. "The idea of a data bank is just ridiculous," says Kasicki, who doubts it will be passed. The parliament is expected to vote on revised bills in the fall.

Sequencing Project: Blattner Wins a Round

Never bet against a turtle winning the race. Geneticist Frederick Blattner, who lost a grant to sequence the *Escherichia coli* genome because his lab was moving too slowly, is back in favor with the mavens of genome funding. Blattner says his grant application to finish sequencing *E. coli* earned a top score from National Institutes of Health (NIH) reviewers, which should enable him to finish the project he started 4 years ago.

NIH considers the project important because it sharpens techniques for sequencing larger genomes and because *E. coli* is used in studies of everything from cancer to evolution. Under a \$7.8 million grant that ended on 30 June, Blattner's lab at the University of Wisconsin has identified 40% of the 4.7 million base pairs in the *E. coli* genome. Many geneticists have praised Blattner's high-quality work, but some have criticized his pace. By now, Blattner was supposed to have sequenced more than 80% of the genome.

Last December, NIH rejected Blattner's bid to renew his grant after a review gave it low marks. This spring, however, when NIH proposed a \$2 million, 2-year grant to finish the project, many geneticists rallied behind Blattner, sending NIH letters on his behalf. Some potential competitors even declined to apply.

Earlier this month, Blattner says, NIH told him that his application won the top score of those submitted. Next stop: review by the advisory council of the National Center for Human Genome Research, which could elect to fund a group that scored worse. In the meantime, NIH has given Blattner about \$250,000 to continue the sequencing until an award is made.

NIH's final decision isn't expected until September. Blattner, however, is optimistic. To replace staff who left after the original grant was not renewed, Blattner has begun interviewing people who "know anything about *E. coli* genetics and sequencing."