LETTERS

By the sea . . .

Writers discuss the past, present, and future of the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts (above). One researcher refers to its "unique value," a "powerful intellectual ferment," and "summer-long interactions of a remarkable mixture of minds." The percentage of "human population . . . concentrated near [sea] coasts" is pinned down. And a paleontologist notes with irony that the sale price of the fossil *Tyrannosaurus rex* Sue was huge, while the discipline of paleontology suffers from a dearth of funding.

Affection for the MBL

The Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, is pleased and flattered to be the subject of an "Institutional profile" (News & Comment, 17 Oct., p. 381). This attention reflects the affection for the MBL in American biology and the special role of this venerable institution. Appreciative as we are, it is necessary, nevertheless, that I correct some errors in the article.

Reporter Wade Roush interviewed me at length when he visited Woods Hole, so that many of facts I convey here were available to him, had he chosen to use them.

To describe Harlyn Halvorson stepping down after reaching retirement age as a "Nixonian fall" is a distortion of the facts. Halvorson is a distinguished colleague whose legacy of achievements on behalf of the laboratory will always be appreciated by the MBL community. The governance change adopted by the MBL 5 years ago was the product of a lengthy process initiated by the Board of Trustees, unrelated to the directorship succession.

I must contradict Roush's contention that John Burris's appointment did not take into account his view of future needs in biological research and the MBL's role in biology. After a lengthy search process, there were three finalists from two continents. All were invited for a final off-campus interview (at Harvard University's Leverett House), where each was asked the same question: "What is your view of the future direction of biological research and the role that the MBL should play?" Burris's vision of the MBL's scientific future played a major role in the subsequent vote, in which he was selected without dissent.

We appreciate the attention given to the successful launch of the MBL's first comprehensive Capital Fund Campaign for $25 million. This target was set on the basis of a realistic appraisal of our fundraising potential. The allocation of these funds was a decision carefully considered by the MBL's Board of Trustees, Science Council, external advisors, and other interested members of the MBL community. The campaign will strengthen summer research and advanced education programs as well as the MBL's year-round program (including the renowned MBL/Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute library).

We share the view reported by Roush that a larger target, if achieved, could resolve problems with the physical plant and reserve funds to serve as a safety net for our grant-dependent scientists. Perhaps among *Science*'s readers there will be supporters of science and the MBL who will recognize this need and opportunity.

As a biologist who has benefited greatly from my years of association with the MBL, I am honored to serve as a trustee. With this honor comes the responsibility to ensure that the laboratory is strong and vibrant for the benefit of future generations of biological scientists. This is the goal of the laboratory's Board of Trustees and of its Director.

With the reference to "dangerous currents" that "may yet drag the lab down," Roush presents a point of view that is strongly divergent from the mainstream of optimism that characterizes the MBL under Burris's leadership. One only needs to speak to the young scientists who will lead the MBL into the future to learn this.

Finally, as a graduate of the distinguished institution in Hanover, New Hampshire, I must correct another error: It is Dartmouth College; there is no such thing as "Dartmouth University."

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The problem at the MBL is that the cure many seek for its problems might destroy its unique value. From its beginnings and into the early 1980s, the MBL was the premier independent biological laboratory with marine facilities. Never with more than a moderately good research plant, the MBL proved that its importance arose from its independence. Governed by its membership, it welcomed any investigator with an interesting project and funds to pay the MBL's then-modest fees. The resulting powerful intellectual ferment was frequently noted, most elegantly by Lewis Thomas (*1*). Without the fetters of administrative channeling, wonderful science emerged from summer-long interactions of a remarkable mixture of minds of diverse training and interests, from undergraduates through the occasional Nobelist, in lectures, courses, laboratory, dining hall, and at the beach.

The danger of growth emphasizing year-round programs is that each addition of a major year-round research unit, no matter how high its quality, tends to erode the MBL's availability to its "summer" scientists of the type that built its reputation. If the MBL is to restore itself to its previous status, it must enhance its ability to service research by established investigators from other institutions. In particular, it must recognize the danger of focusing on any three subject areas in a buildup of permanent programs with permanent staff to support when funding runs dry. This is because the MBL should be able to reinvent itself rapidly to keep up with and even lead, as it formerly has, the advance of many aspects of biology. It can do this economically only if it emphasizes the ideas and efforts of its established workers with home bases in the colleges, universities, and research institutions throughout the country.

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References

1. L. Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell* (Viking Penguin, New York, 1978).

Using a combination of unattributed negative comments along with quotes taken out of context, Roush paints an inaccurate picture of the MBL as an institution in crisis. The facts are as follows: When John Burris took the job as CEO and director, he inherited an institution that was hemorrhaging both endowment and resources. In the space of his 5-year tenure, he single-handedly led the MBL through much-needed reforms in governmental structure, recruited a top-notch Board of Trustees that has the ability to secure the institution's financial future, and increased the endowment by 73%, all while significantly expanding the institution's most valuable asset: its world-class science. There are many of us who are more concerned with the long-term stability of the science at America's oldest and still most prestigious marine laboratory than with purported rustic qualities of the summer investigators' cabins.

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The Extinction of Paleontology?

The recent discussion of the demographic crisis in paleontology (R. Stone, News & Comment, 10 Oct., p. 219) makes sobering reading for me and my colleagues. Over the last 15 years, the proportion of paleontologists approaching retirement has increased dramatically, while the number of younger