water table would wreak havoc on Ashur's buried mud-brick structures. "We are trying to convince the Ministry of Irrigation to impound less water—about 50% less—so we can save Ashur," he says. But that must be weighed against providing desperately needed water to farms and cities, says Damerji.

Flooding will also destroy dozens of more obscure but important sites in Assyria's heartland. For example, little digging has been done at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, a city just upstream from Ashur that served as an Assyrian capital in the 13th century B.C. "Who knows what's there?" says Michael Roaf, an archaeologist at the University of Munich. Iraqi experts are hurriedly surveying areas near the dam that would be submerged first; a catalog of endangered sites should be ready soon.

Damerji has invited foreign assistance in the Makhool effort, but it is unclear how quickly an effective rescue operation could be organized. U.S. and British archaeologists are barred by their own countries from working in Iraq, and researchers from other European countries and Japan are only now returning after a decade-long hiatus (*Science*, 6 July 2001, p. 38). The Iraqi government, hobbled by sanctions, has little funding for archaeology.

"Ashur is a site of world significance, and this affects the whole academic community," says Harriet Crawford, director of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. The conference organizers intend to issue a statement deploring the destruction of Ashur. But with tensions in the region rising over a possible military campaign to oust Saddam Hussein in the coming months, researchers concerned with humanity's heritage have a tough fight to gain the ears of politicians in Baghdad and beyond. **–ANDREW LAWLER**

CASPIAN SEA

Scientists Deplore OK For Sturgeon Catch

CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—Marine biologists are livid over an international panel's decision to allow nations to resume fishing beluga sturgeon from the Caspian Sea this year. Quotas were endorsed last week by a policy committee of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). However, some pressure groups are demanding to see the data CITES officials used to conclude that the beluga, prized for its caviar, can withstand commercial harvesting.

Last June, three of the five nations around the Caspian's shores—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia—agreed to an unprecedented 6-month ban on fishing sturgeon. But in January, the Caspian states proposed sturgeon quotas for 2002 with the expectation that the CITES Secretariat would allow them to resume trade in caviar. The beluga variety can fetch more than $2500 per kilogram.

Looks fishy. Scientists have challenged claims that beluga stocks are stable.

The secretariat obliged. In a 6 March statement, CITES Secretary-General Willem Wijnstekers said that all five Caspian governments had demonstrated "stable or, in some cases, increasing" sturgeon numbers through a program to survey and manage stocks. "This breakthrough on sturgeon management marks a dramatic step forward toward transparency and cooperation," said CITES Deputy Secretary-General Jim Armstrong.

But many experts are shocked by the suggestion that beluga stocks are stable. "It's perplexing that CITES, an organization charged with protecting endangered wildlife, has hung the beluga out to dry," says marine biologist Ellen Pikitch of the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York City. She and others contend that CITES officials ignored the results last year of a comprehensive survey of Caspian fish stocks by the Caspian Environment Programme, a World Bank and European Union initiative. The survey found few mature sturgeon, prompting a call for a 10-year fishing ban (*Science*, 18 January, p. 430).

Opponents of the new quotas want CITES officials to reveal the underlying data mentioned in the 6 March statement. The secretariat "has not provided a rationale to justify its decision nor any scientific evidence to support its estimates of beluga sturgeon numbers," charges the lobbying group Caviar Emptor. Armstrong could not be reached before *Science* went to press, and other officials declined to give details.

Caviar Emptor and other groups want beluga elevated to the Appendix One list, which would ban its export from any signatory nation. The first opportunity for that will come at the November meeting of the CITES parties in Santiago, Chile.

–RICHARD STONE

CREDITS: (TOP TO BOTTOM) HANS-JÜRGEN BURKARD/BILDERBERG; CAVIAR EMPTOR; U.S. ARMY

ScienceScope

Stem Cell Showdown Australia's state and federal governments are preparing to square off over human embryonic stem cell research. On 6 April, the nation's prime minister and the heads of its eight states and territories intend to discuss the regulation of stem cell research, with at least one state premier vowing to resist any national ban.

In late February, Australian scientists were surprised by press reports that federal Cabinet members had agreed in principle to ignore recommendations from a parliamentary panel and outlaw the derivation of new stem cell lines from spare embryos left at fertility clinics (*Science*, 1 March, p. 1619). But Bob Carr, the premier of New South Wales, promises that his state will set up its own stem cell derivation center if that happens.

Researchers hope the federal government will back down. Cell biologist Martin Pera of Monash University in Melbourne says that stem cell scientists have had "very positive" meetings with senior government officials, including Prime Minister John Howard. Although the lobbying effort has cut significantly into research time, Pera says the tradeoff is necessary: "If we don't get this right, we won't be able to do the research at all."

Tiny Combat The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) last week won $50 million from the U.S. Army for a nanoscience center. Over the next 5 years, the Institute for Soldier Nanotechnologies will conduct basic research aimed at developing tiny devices for everything from bullet-proof uniforms to camouflage that can change color with chameleon-like quickness. The Cambridge, Massachusetts–based center—to be led by materials scientist Edwin Thomas—is expected to involve up to 150 researchers, including 35 professors and 80 graduate students from nine MIT departments.

The new institute is the latest Army bid to harness academic talent to the task of modernizing the armed forces—and the first of more than a dozen university centers to be awarded through an open competition. In 1999 the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles received $45 million to bring Hollywood-style technologies to troop training. Waiting in the wings is a biotechnology center, although Army science chief A. Michael Andrews says it is likely to get less funding than the MIT and USC institutes.