

**JEWELS IN THE CROWN III:****Tropical Research Center****David Malakoff**

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.

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

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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.

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