

In Brief

Study of world's ecosystems seeks reviewers

The Millennium Assessment, the most extensive study of the world's ecosystems ever to be attempted, is seeking nominations for expert reviewers (<http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.htm>). This US\$21 million, four-year project anticipates involving 1500 natural and social scientists in an effort to document the state of the world's ecosystems and their ability to provide ecosystem goods and services in terms of health, livelihood and food security. Nominations of experts to review both global and regional assessments will be accepted until July 2002. They will be selected to evaluate both global and regional reports that are due to be completed in 2003. Areas of expertise that are being sought include ecology, systematics, forestry, economics, environmental law, fisheries, anthropology and paleontology.

The Millennium Assessment represents a brand of science that is often neglected by academic researchers who need to build individual reputations; nonetheless, it is hoped that some measure of social responsibility will persuade hundreds of scientists worldwide to contribute to this global effort to map the health of our planet. *PK*

Brazil cracks down on illegal logging

A damning report from the environmental group Greenpeace has prompted the Brazilian Government to declare a moratorium on logging of bigleaf mahogany *Swietenia* spp. This prized timber, which can fetch >US\$1600 per m³, provides a key economic impetus for logging Amazonian rainforests.

The report, 'Partners in Mahogany Crime' (<http://www.greenpeace.org>) documents widespread corruption and disregard for environmental laws in the mahogany trade. Timber cutters falsified mahogany inventories, obtained fraudulent authorizations, and logged in Amerindian reserves – which is strictly prohibited. Much of the illegal mahogany is exported to high-end furniture manufacturers in the USA and Europe.

Many are hailing the increasingly cooperative attitude of the Brazilian Government in attempting to crack down on rampant illegal logging. Soon after declaring the moratorium, Brazilian officials seized >7000 m³ of mahogany worth almost

US\$7 million on the international market. The Government has also frozen all mahogany logging, transport, and export operations, whilst it investigates the claims of the Greenpeace report. According to Brazil's national security agency, 80% of all timber in the Amazon is extracted illegally, with no environmental controls or payment of royalties, and logging is regarded as one of the main drivers of Amazonian forest destruction. *WFL*

African conservation biology section to launch this summer

Following up on a September 2001 meeting of African conservation biologists that was funded by the AAAS, an African section in the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) is being launched this July at the SCB meetings in Canterbury, UK. At this meeting the section will hold a special symposium entitled 'Living with Wildlife in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities'. Most biologists are well aware of the conservation challenges faced in Africa, but there is much less appreciation of the practical hurdles that must be overcome if that continent's spectacular wildlife is to be protected. An urgent priority is to facilitate information exchange to and between African countries, which is being addressed by providing French translations of abstracts in the SCB journal *Conservation Biology*, and participation in the SCB through greater African membership.

The newly founded African section aims to promote collaborations through meetings and a web-based bulletin. To participate in this initiative, one can join the SCB African section by sending an e-mail to africa@conservationbiology.org, or for more information go to <http://www.conservationbiology.org>. *PK*

NMFS is sued after ecologists blast harvest policy

The US National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) received a negative review from a panel of renowned ecologists regarding its approach to setting harvest limits for threatened and endangered salmon (<http://www.nwfsc.noaa.gov/cbd/trt/rsrp.htm>). Among many complaints, the most damning was perhaps the revelation that decision-makers neglect stochasticity and uncertainty in population dynamics. Quoting from this scathing review, an environmental organization called

Washington Trout has sued NMFS for failing to adequately examine the risk of harvesting threatened stocks from the Puget Sound region (<http://www.washingtontrout.org/>).

Given the fact that approximately half of the commercial fisheries in the USA are currently classified as overexploited, one suspects that the skepticism about salmon harvest management is pertinent to harvest management in general. The institutional response of NMFS tends to focus on the need for better 'stock assessment' methodologies, whereas an ecologist would be likely to argue that the need is for better ecological models and understanding of population biology (as well as more political courage). *PK*

Examining the safety of Bt transgenic crops

In response to vocal critics of agricultural biotechnology, the American Academy of Microbiology held a two-day colloquium that focused on the safety of Bt products (both sprays and transgenic plants that contain pesticidal toxins produced by *Bacillus thuringiensis*). The motivation for the workshop was a frustration among scientists who work in this area of agricultural technology for being seen as 'enemies of the environment' by some environmental groups. Bt microbial sprays are used widely to control pests on organically grown crops, and the inclusion of Bt genes in crops such as cotton is heralded by proponents as a means of reducing environmental damage owing to much more hazardous chemical insecticides. To promote a balanced review, there were no scientists from industry present, and three ecologists were invited to present their perspective. The consensus report, which will be broadly disseminated and placed on the academy's website (<http://www.asmusa.org/acasrc/aca1.htm>), is intended to educate the public and policy makers about Bt technology.

That the Academy of Microbiology routinely produces these 'critical issues colloquia' is evidence of a growing trend among scientific societies to feel that their mission must include nontechnical communication of science regarding key public issues. *PK*

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