

Smoke palls return to Southeast Asia

Dense smoke from forest fires is again blanketing large expanses of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Three years ago, smog from similar fires drastically reduced visibility in many Southeast-Asian cities and heralded some of the most catastrophic forest destruction in the world. Air pollution from forest burning became so severe that many urban residents were forced to wear masks. Those fires led to an estimated US\$9.3 billion in economic losses, resulting from the destruction of agricultural land, negative impacts on public health and tourism, and other causes.

The current fires are ignited by slash-and-burn farmers, especially in Borneo and Sumatra, as they clear forests to plant crops. Although Indonesian and Malaysian authorities have technically banned forest burning, there has been virtually no enforcement of the decrees, especially among small farmers in the region.

In response to the pall of smoke that is sharply reducing visibility in major cities, such as Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia has banned the release of specific air-pollution readings, claiming that negative media reports would hurt its tourism industry. Before the ban, monitoring stations in Kuala Lumpur and Sarawak had reported unhealthy levels of air pollution and many residents complained of throat irritation.

In percentage terms, Southeast Asia has the highest rate of deforestation of any major tropical region. Illegal fires, logging and large-scale clearing for oil-palm plantations are among the main causes of forest destruction. *WFL*

Have environmental organizations lost their way?

In a provocative series of newspaper articles (<http://www.sacbee.com/news/projects/environment/20010422.html>), Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Tom Knudson, charges that environmental groups have become increasingly estranged from their original mission. Drawing on more than 200 interviews and extensive travel through Mexico and western North America, Knudson paints a disturbing portrait of extravagance and soirees occurring at the

expense of actual land protection. Knudson renounces the tendency of many environmental groups to measure their success exclusively in terms of fund raising. Knudson repeatedly finds that instead of using thoughtful analysis informed by critical science to establish priorities, environmental nonprofits rely on 'slogans and sound bites [that] masquerade as scientific fact'. The disillusionment highlighted by Knudson does not represent the sour grapes of anti-environmental partisans, but rather reflects the disappointment of scientific researchers and lifelong grassroots environmental activists.

Of course, not all environmental organizations fare poorly under Knudson's scrutiny. And no one, including Knudson, would argue with the many accomplishments of the environmental movement. The question is whether these groups could be doing a better job if they paid more attention to measuring their accomplishments in terms of biodiversity protection, as opposed to emphasizing 'dollars raised'. These articles have prompted much discussion among the staff of environmental groups and political leaders. Any ecologist who teaches environmental issues should read Knudson's articles, and consider assigning them to students as background reading. *PK*

Brazil launches risk assessment program

The University of Sao Paulo (USP) is establishing a postgraduate program in risk assessment for genetically modified organisms. To launch this program, USP is convening an international workshop aimed at the ecological impacts of pest resistance transgenes, with special emphasis on tropical agriculture and centers of biological diversity (<http://bina.unido.org/binas>). The workshop, which is being held this September in Brazil, includes Latin American scientists, and leaders in biotechnology risk assessment from around the globe. UNIDO (the United Nations Industrial Development Organization) is helping to sponsor the workshop as part of an ongoing global program in biosafety that is aimed at encouraging countries to formulate biotechnology regulation.

In addition to senior researchers, the workshop is intended for government policy makers and industry executives from Latin America, as a catalyst for establishing a balanced policy in the controversial area of biotechnology. The workshop also represents a first for advanced education in Latin America – it will use 'distance learning technologies' to make the presentations and discussions available throughout Brazil. *PK*

Ecological scenario building guides policy in North America

The Pacific Northwest Ecosystem Research Consortium (funded primarily by the US Environmental Protection Agency) is soon to release an atlas of ecological scenarios for Oregon. The project maps out current land use and land cover at the quarter acre resolution, and then produces three different maps of the future assuming different ecological trajectories (http://www.fsl.orst.edu/pnwer/wrb/atlas/atlas_toc.html). The three alternative scenarios are an aggressive development scenario, a conservation scenario and a business-as-usual scenario. These 'future maps' make clear to both the public and decision-makers that choices available now will have consequences in the future.

In addition, the project also produces a map depicting conditions in 1850. All the maps are then interpreted in terms of what they imply for effects on ecological conditions. The Oregon project is noteworthy because it is probably the finest-scale scenario analysis yet completed, and the one most soundly based on measured data. The use of alternative scenarios is becoming increasingly popular in environmental decision making, because scenarios bundle together assumptions and values in coherent packages that are easier to understand than are complex models with innumerable permutations of parameters. *PK*

TNC initiates global search for new international science leadership

Not only is The Nature Conservancy (TNC) the largest and most successful environmental organization in the world, but it is also the largest nongovernmental