

OLD WORLD

Threat to Deep Sea Research

FEARS are growing among oceanographers that a United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1973 could result in unprecedented restrictions on scientific research on the high seas. Proposals sponsored by a number of countries, notably the Latin Americans, would, if implemented, create an International Sea Bed Authority which would not only grant, or refuse, permission for scientists to conduct research in international waters, but would also supervise the research at all stages. All results and data would have to be approved by the authority before publication.

These crippling proposals are being strongly opposed by several nations—Britain, USSR and USA included—in the preparatory committee for the Conference on the Law of the Sea, but scientists are sufficiently concerned for the International Council of Scientific Unions to have passed a resolution in Helsinki last month demanding that open research in the oceans should be encouraged “and should not require consent when beyond the limits of territorial waters”.

The Latin American proposals are in fact only part of the role envisaged for the International Sea Bed Authority. The Law of the Sea has grown up in a comparatively piecemeal fashion since Grotius first framed international law in the sixteenth century. Jurisdiction over continental shelves was established by the Geneva Convention of 1958 which ruled that states have authority over their adjoining sea beds to a depth of 200 metres, or to whatever depth they are able to exploit the sea bed's resources—a definition that can at best be described as imprecise. Within the continental shelf areas lie territorial waters which vary in extent from three to twelve miles from land. Within territorial waters states have complete control and no foreign vessel may normally enter them without permission. Research may not be carried out except with permission of the relevant state, although it is usually granted (often after a wait of several months). Scientific research on continental shelves on, for example, waves and currents does not now require official permission outside territorial waters, but any research that involves the sea bed does require permission. Again this is usually granted. At present scientific research on the high seas is free of any restrictions.

In 1970, however, the UN decided to have a conference on the law of the sea, partly to tidy up international sea law and partly to provide for the none too distant day when the deep sea is exploited for mineral resources. American mining companies are already claiming that given a suitable legal climate they will be able by 1975, to recover copper and nickel from the manganese nodules dredged from the floor of the Pacific Ocean.

But the issues at stake in any revision of high sea law are clearly enormous. Huge economic and political considerations are involved, affecting mineral hydrocarbon resources, fishing rights, defence commitments, pollution, and unavoidably, scientific research. The preparatory committee which has been working on the conference in one form or another for the past five years, is the largest in the UN's history. More than ninety countries now hold a seat on it. The importance of the conference is highlighted by the appointment of Sir Roger Jackling, formerly Britain's ambassador in Bonn and a very senior Foreign Office official, as the head of the British delegation.

It has already become clear that some sort of International Sea Bed Authority is bound to emerge from the conference to regulate mineral exploitation; but the form it will take is far from clear.

The developing countries, with an eye on the mineral cake and only too aware that they do not have the advanced technologies necessary to exploit the deep sea, are anxious that the authority be an extremely powerful body, which will itself prospect and exploit the seas' resources on a commercial basis. The developed countries, aware that it is they who will have to provide the capital for such a venture, and worried about the overheads of such an international organization, not to mention the political difficulties of running a multi-national body with a multi-national staff, particularly when there is profit involved, are very much against so strong an authority. Most developed countries are willing, however, that an authority should be set up which would simply license states or companies to prospect, with some sort of machinery for assuring fair shares for all.

The scientific controls that the Latin American countries propose, spring from the same fear that they are losing out. They propose that international observers should accompany all research vessels on the high seas to ensure that the developing countries are in touch with the latest research, and they are unwilling to accept that all scientific results are openly published. There is a deep suspicion among the

ENVIRONMENT

Zuckerman Commission Attacked

THE Zuckerman Commission on Mining and the Environment has come under increasingly heavy attack from conservation bodies during the past week. In a letter to *The Times*, the heads of the National Trust, the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales, and the Standing Committee on National Parks have demanded that the commission's report should be “repudiated as an unbalanced argument for mining on a scale and of destructive effect not experienced hitherto in England and Wales”.

Earlier in the week the Standing Committee wrote to Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for the Environment, accusing the commission of “tendentiously advancing the interests of non-ferrous metal mining at the expense of the environment”. The committee goes

on to say the commission's recommendations “put the mining industry into an unwarrantably favourable position in respect of planning control generally and encourage mining development in National Parks”.

The committee argues that the Zuckerman commission's recommendations for controlling exploratory drilling (see *Nature*, 239, 185; 1972) will in fact encourage the eventual granting of mining permission. Exploratory drilling involves capital investment, which “is always a strong argument in favour of development”, the committee argues. The committee also claims that the commission's twelve recommendations on pollution control and rehabilitation of the landscape “assumes a practicability of controlling pollution and of rehabilitation, which experience of existing extractive industries in England and Wales denies”.