

IN BRIEF

Petition to Poles

Three Nobel prize-winners—George Wald (medicine), William Lipscomb (chemistry) and Kenneth Arrow (economics)—and some twelve other well-known American scientists are among the 139 signatories of a petition to the Polish government asking for the immediate release of the imprisoned members of the Workers' Defence Committee "whose only crime consists of defending the basic human rights of others".

Meanwhile it is reported from Moscow that the physicist Professor Mark Azbel has, exactly six years after his first application, been granted permission to emigrate to Israel. Since 1974, when Professor Alexander Voronel went to Israel, Azbel has been chief organiser of the illicit Sunday Seminars for refusnik scientists.

UK joins in on test ban

The Soviet Union and United States began talks in Washington last week on how to achieve a comprehensive nuclear test ban. The Russians are reported to be keen to come to some agreement on a test ban and President Carter is said to have made it a priority in his programme of arms control.

As the result of a Russian request Britain will join the two super powers, starting 13 July, in drawing up a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. The three countries have collaborated before on nuclear arms control: in 1963 on the partial test ban treaty and in 1968 on the non-proliferation treaty. It is thought likely that Britain will go along with a comprehensive treaty provided that it includes nuclear explosions for peaceful as well as military purposes.

Neutron source

Rutherford Laboratory has been given the go-ahead to build a spallation neutron source. The announcement, during the official opening of the laboratory's laser facility (see page 666), greatly eases the transition of the Rutherford into a new era.

Nimrod, the laboratory's 7 GeV proton accelerator, is due to close in 1978, and although the new laser facility goes some way towards using the laboratory's expertise, there had been fears that in the absence of further projects there would have to be redundancies. The spallation neutron source, however, in which 800 MeV protons pulsed at 50 cycles per second will be fired at a heavy element source to break up nuclei and yield fast neutrons, will use much of the existing human and hardware investment in Nimrod.

I recently attended the 1977 Sponsored Film Festival, organised by the British Industrial and Scientific Film Association and held in London during ten days in May. During that period 188 films and video tapes were shown, and numbers of prizes were awarded by distinguished panels of judges. The films were divided into ten categories—education, training, safety, technical, scientific and research and so on. I restricted my attendance to "Ecology and the Environment".

This was an interesting, and, to me, a new experience. Although in my youth I was an enthusiastic film goer, witnessing the change from the silent film to the 'talkie', and the peak of the industry's prosperity, I have not been inside a commercial cinema for several years. I occasionally watch old feature films on television, and have often seen, and used, short scientific films at lectures and conferences. I have even been concerned with making some such films. But I have never before sat from 9.30 am to after 5 pm watching a continuous series of moving pictures.

I found that the organisers of the festival had given our theme a wide interpretation, for in addition to seeing productions about energy and pollution, nature reserves and the protection of wildlife, we were also treated to propaganda films trying to persuade us to visit Guernsey, the Lake District or the historic castles of England and Wales.

In one way or another, the oil industry was prominent. The government's Central Office of Information screened "Clean and Pleasant Land" showing the horrors of oil pollution on the sea and the beach, and how

Britain was coping with the problems. Two potential polluters, British Petroleum and Shell UK brightened their tarnished images with an admirable sermon on energy saving and a pic-

Ecology on film**KENNETH MELLANBY**

ture of the, as yet, unspoiled Peak District National Park.

Most of the rest of the programme was more truly environmental and ecological. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Britain's largest voluntary conservation organisation, showed two films made by their own unit. In the first, David Bellamy, one of our leading telly-dons, described the dangers to our small areas of surviving heathland. In the second, Ian Prestt, the Society's Director, spoke persuasively about its work. These combined propaganda with education, and included good and unusual natural history photography.

However, as I watched, I wondered if some films might not, by their very excellence, defeat their own objectives. For instance "The Petersfinger Cuckoos" enabled the cinema audience, and those who watched it on television, to observe the most intimate details of the private life of this elusive and parasitic bird. It all looked so easy, yet we know that "the few seconds of the secretive cuckoo laying its egg took more than 1,000 hours of waiting and watching". I have sometimes been worried lest inexperienced town-dwellers who have watched such programmes may be discouraged when they visit the country and see comparatively little wildlife, even on a nature reserve with the help of a skilled naturalist.

Fortunately, this does not seem to be the case. The sound of the voice of a real, wild, live cuckoo seems to be appreciated all the more. When, at our home in Huntingdonshire, we open our rural and unkempt English garden to the public, to raise money for various worthy conservationist causes, we set out a simple nature trail demonstrating wild flowers ('weeds' to the conventional gardener), birds' nests and even newly-dropped fox dung. We find that most of our visitors, and all of their children, appear to be enthralled. It seems that the most sophisticated nature films are treated as something different from real life, in the same way that violence in Westerns and crime programmes seems unrelated to that experienced in our streets and after football matches. Nature films are undoubtedly useful, but they are no substitute for the real thing.