

Dial a vector

Tim Harris

Cloning Vectors: A Laboratory Manual. Edited by P.H. Pouwels, B.E. Enger-Valk and W.J. Brammar. *Elsevier:1985. Approximately 400 sheets in Loose-leaf binder. \$55, Dfl.160.*

LABORATORY manuals have become a popular means of disseminating the complicated protocols of modern molecular genetics, the best example being *Molecular Cloning — A Laboratory Manual*, referred to by some as the cloning bible, by Maniatis *et al.* Some of these manuals, like the above, combine theory with practice while others are simply sophisticated recipe books. Although described as a laboratory manual, *Cloning Vectors* is a directory of the vectors currently available for introducing genes into a variety of organisms. The vital statistics of some 300 vectors, both plasmid and phage in origin, are described by means of clear, single-page diagrams. About one-third of the plasmids are those used for the most commonly employed cloning host — the gram negative bacterium *E. coli*. The remaining chapters cover vectors for gram positive bacteria (for example, *Streptomyces*), fungi (including yeast) and plant and animal cells.

The work is comprehensive, as up to date as might be expected in a fast-moving field, and the clarity and simplicity of the figures is impressive. Provided you know what you are looking for, the salient facts are easy to obtain. It is possible to use the summary tables at the end of each chapter to locate vectors with desired characteristics (one of the objectives of the book) but it's a pity little attempt was made to rank or distinguish commonly used vectors from more esoteric and not necessarily more useful ones. The loose-leaf format of the directory is designed so that annual updates can be included; some of the newer cosmid vectors for genome walking and vectors for insect cell expression can be expected*.

The lack of theoretical back up — the introductions to each chapter are only one or two pages — indicates that this book is not intended for the individual graduate or postdoctoral molecular biologist. Rather, like a telephone directory, it is a reference book that every genetic engineering lab will want access to, be it on their library, laboratory or office shelf. □

*These are indeed included in the first update which will be available in September. Price \$20. Dfl. 60. Orders for the main manual plus three annual updates are entitled to the reduced price of \$97.75. Dfl. 287.

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History isn't bunk

John H. Lawton

Modeling Nature. Episodes in the History of Population Ecology. By Sharon E. Kingsland. *University of Chicago Press: 1985. Pp.267. \$27.50, £23.50.*

AS EVERY schoolboy knows, Henry Ford thought that history was bunk, a view that is certainly common, if not universally held by many creative and successful scientists about their own subject. There is, after all, too much to read about what is happening today to care about what happened yesterday, still less about events 50 or more years ago. But a sense of perspective is no bad thing in any walk of life, and science is no exception, as Sharon Kingsland's book makes plain.

The book is a detailed history of the rise of population ecology from its early beginnings in the writings of Frederic Clements and Stephen Forbes (who in turn drew their inspiration from Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer and so on, but historians have to stop going backwards somewhere), through Alfred Lotka, Raymond Pearl and Vito Volterra, and from there on a direct intellectual route via Georgii Gause to Evelyn Hutchinson, David Lack

and Robert MacArthur. There were, of course, other contributors, some major some minor, but this pedigree is particularly clearly defined, and gives a good indication of the scope of the book, and the time-scale involved.

Reviewing books is often a chore, is usually educative, but is only infrequently a real pleasure. *Modeling Nature* unfolds like a good detective story, and is a delight to read for at least two reasons. It is a beautifully written, well-crafted account of a complex subject; although I thought I knew the roots to population ecology fairly well, I found that many of my ideas were either fuzzy or wrong. It is extremely useful to have the key intellectual advances so clearly laid out. Second, and probably more important, the book is about people as well as ideas. It was, after all, no lesser historian than Edward Gibbon who said that history is "little more than a register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind"! One would hesitate to use quite these terms to describe the history of population biology, but the founding fathers were not modest angels. They were certainly clever, but they were also — in varying degrees — opinionated, scheming and paranoid, as well as insightful, helpful and wise. And all of them were men, which in itself is an interesting comment on the sociology of

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