

International space

Space year for Columbus

Washington

MOMENTUM is building up for an International Space Year in 1992. With a strong congressional champion, US participation in the scheme seems assured. What remains uncertain is whether it will be a significant scientific programme, or merely window dressing for the International Geosphere/Biosphere Program, launched last month at the meeting of the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) at Berne and also due to begin in the 1990s.

The idea for an International Space Year, or ISY, came last year from Senator Spark Matsunaga (Democrat, Hawaii), who suggested that it would be a fitting way of marking the 500th anniversary of Columbus's trip to North America, and might prevent the United States from "backing into the Space Age with our eyes

heading for a collision over funds, but that worry seems to have abated, largely because ISY will probably not need new funds but merely the redirection of existing programmes. IGBP will be a big spender on programmes that would continue for as long as a decade.

The selection of 1992 for ISY could be a good choice for more than historical

reasons. Several space missions planned for the 1990s should be in operation that year, including two US and two Japanese satellites. Several Soviet Cosmos satellites are also planned for operation in 1992.

As international bodies begin to consider the implications of joining ISY, plans for IGBP are moving ahead. A secretariat will be established at the Royal Swedish Academy, and appointments to a special ICSU coordinating committee will be named by the beginning of 1987.

Joseph Palca

Japan fellows

British are reluctant travellers

Tokyo

THERE are signs that the Royal Society of London may be able to make fuller use of a scheme for recruiting British postdoctoral fellows to research posts in Japan. That, at least, seems to be the impression left on Japanese speakers at a conference at Bristol and by a visit to Japan earlier this year by Sir Arnold Burgen, the foreign secretary of the Royal Society.

The scheme is organized in Japan by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) and provides for up to ten fellowships a year to be held by British scientists. In spite of the generous tax-free allowances (amounting to more than £20,000 or ¥4.54 million a year), the Royal Society has hitherto been unable to fill more than about a half of the places available. The cost of the scheme is borne entirely by the Japanese; JSPS officials are anxious that the vacancies be filled, and told Burgen as much when he was here.

Last month's Bristol seminar was planned as the first of a series meant to interest British academics in working in Japan. The speakers included Professor Minoru Oda, director of the Institute of Space and Astronautical Science, an outgrowth of the University of Tokyo, and Mr Hiroshi Kida, director-general of JSPS. There are already substantial links between Japan and Britain in fields such as astronomy, high-energy physics and biotechnology, some within the framework of formal agreements signed earlier in the decade.

In this spirit, the University of Leicester will be providing the proportional counters for the Japanese X-ray astronomy satellite ASTRO-C, due to be launched next year. And agreement is expected soon on the construction by physicists at Tohoku and Tsukuba Universities of a multi-angle rotor spectrometer for the British spallation neutron source at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. The Royal Society has also drawn attention to the fruitfulness of collaborations such as that between the Royal Observatory Edinburgh and the Tokyo Astronomical Institute and the annual joint biotechnology workshops.

Why, then, is it so hard to fill the vacant fellowships? Identical schemes run by France and West Germany are regularly over-subscribed. Fear of the unknown seems to be part of the problem, as is uncertainty about future job prospects. Job-hunting from a distance is difficult, while those visiting postdoctoral fellows who might be tempted by teaching posts at Japanese universities discover that such posts are virtually impossible to obtain. The Royal Society is therefore planning to offer one-year fellowships in Britain to people returning from Japan, and will advertise the scheme more widely.

David Swinbanks

UK fund for China

THE visit of the British monarch to China this week, seen as a sign of goodwill over the agreement on the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty reached earlier this year, was garnished on 13 October by the Queen's announcement in Beijing of a new £1 million fund to allow Chinese postdoctoral scientists to work in UK institutes.

The new fund has been established largely through the efforts of Lord Rhodes, who has raised about one-third of the money from the British government's Overseas Development Agency and the rest from about 20 of the larger companies operating in the United Kingdom. The Royal Society will run the fund and will offer the first of 30 one-year awards that will be known as Royal Fellowships at the start of next year in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the China Association of Science and Technology.

There is an increasing demand from the Chinese for the opportunity to work in foreign laboratories. About 20,000 research workers and students are currently abroad, mostly in the United States, Japan and West Germany. Only about 1,400 are in the United Kingdom, which has lagged behind in the provision of places, but it is hoped the new fund will mark an upturn and stimulate the provision of further schemes.

Nigel Williams



fixed firmly on the ground". At the request of Congress, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) formed an interagency group to look into the proposal and reported in May that the international response to the idea was "overwhelmingly positive". NASA suggested that the Committee for Space Research (COSPAR) might be an appropriate organizing body. In July, COSPAR decided to form a preliminary committee to coordinate preparations for ISY, using the International Geophysical Year as a model.

The National Research Council, the research arm of the National Academy of Sciences, met in August to discuss its role in ISY. Just last month, COSPAR's parent body, ICSU, decided to form an *ad hoc* committee to investigate the plan. ICSU will next October make a final decision whether formally to join ISY. The International Astronautical Federation is also considering its role in ISY.

Supporters of ISY say it will be a significant worldwide educational effort, encouraging a better understanding of space science. For a time, it appeared that ISY and the International Geosphere/Biosphere Program (IGBP) might be