



Going up: the Gemini facility at Cerro Pachon, Chile, pictured last month.

Seventh heaven for Australia's optical astronomers

[CANBERRA] The Gemini optical telescope project has broadened its international membership by including Australia as the seventh partner, alongside the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Chile, Argentina and Brazil.

The announcement, due to be made yesterday (18 February) by the education minister, David Kemp, ends several years of frustration for Australian astronomers who missed an earlier opportunity to join Gemini and were also denied the chance to join the Very Large Telescope project in Chile.

Australia will contribute A\$13.5 million (US\$9.2 million) over five years towards Gemini's capital costs, plus A\$667,000 a year in running costs (rising to A\$1.1 million in 2001 and beyond). This is one of the largest allocations of public money Australia has made to a basic research facility. Although the money is not 'new', having been designated as a priority in the Australian Research Council (ARC)'s budget, it shows a fresh willingness by the government to support a flagship project with popular appeal.

Gemini operates a pair of telescopes in Chile and Hawaii. Matt Mountain, director of Gemini within the US National Science Foundation, says the extra funds will allow "enhanced scientific productivity". This will offset the small decrease in the original partners' observing time needed to accommodate Australia's share. Forthcoming technical enhancements will include infrared sensors to see guide-stars in the brighter hours of dawn, allowing extended observing time.

Australia was invited in 1994 to join the Very Large Telescope project of the European Southern Observatory in Chile, but in 1996 the then science minister, Peter McGauran, finally refused to finance Australia's entry (see *Nature* 381, 100). The UK Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council later backed an ARC bid to persuade the Gemini partners to expand their membership. Securing funding remained problematic but now seems to have been achieved.

Peter Pockley

Moscow's 'missing fossils' come under new scrutiny

[MUNICH] A criminal investigation may soon begin into the alleged theft of fossils said to be worth a million US dollars from the Palaeontological Institute in Moscow, part of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Yuri Rybakov, an independent member of the Russian parliament, has said that he is convinced by evidence from some of the institute's researchers that its management had been involved in illegally approving the export and sale of items from its fossil collection, one of the most important in the world.

Since 1992, 27 labyrinthodont skulls, including three holotypes (reference specimens), five dinosaur skulls, six mammoth tusks and a collection of ammonites have gone missing. Some have subsequently been identified in collections in the West. The full list of missing fossils may be even longer than this, say the institute's scientists.

The scientists have until now been afraid to speak out for fear of losing their jobs. But the directors of the institute have started reducing staffing levels in anticipation of the academy's general restructuring programme. And some of those who have lost their jobs have decided to make the thefts public.

Last autumn the director of the institute, Alexei Rozanov, announced a plan to cut half of the scientific staff positions. Although he backed down after legal action by the unions, Rozanov announced shortly before Christmas that ten per cent of the posts were to go, based on a recommendation expected from the academy. The brunt of the cuts has fallen on researchers rather than administrators, including some of those most concerned about the missing fossils.

In January, seven senior scientists from the institute sent an open letter to the All-Russian Palaeontological Society, outlining their fears for the collection, and pointing out that the authorities had "kept silent about" the missing fossils, rather than investigating them properly. The letter also questioned the decision to sever the institute's connections with the international working group that had been set up two years ago to help locate and return stolen fossils (see *Nature* 384, 499; 1996), and brought into question the reasoning behind the recent sackings.

It also refers to the secrecy surrounding Nauka (Science), a company recently created within the academy of sciences. The Palaeontological Institute signed an agreement with Nauka in December, giving the company responsibility for its exhibitions of fossils and other commercial activities. Scientists fear 'covert' privatization of the fossil collection, and suspect that parts of it might be sold off.

Vladimir Strakov, director of the Institute

of Earth Physics in Moscow and a member of the Guild of Directors of the Academy of Sciences, believes all these issues are linked. He is also concerned that the academy has been reluctant to address what he described as the "deep problems" of the institute.

Results of a limited inquiry into the missing fossils set up by the academy last year were never made public. The head of the inquiry committee, Lev Andreev, director of the academy's Botanical Gardens, says that there was "no evidence of deliberate theft — aside from one skull which has now been returned — but only the absence of a properly organized inventory system". After the investigation, the academy gave the institute money to improve its security system, he said.

Strakov has recently taken up the case of the missing fossils, and says that even though he anticipates coming under pressure from the academy — and could lose his job under cover of the academy's reorganization — he will fight "to a conclusion". Strakov is particularly concerned that the substantial earnings from the institute's recent exhibitions abroad appear not to have filtered back into the institute as had been intended.

The science committee of the Duma, the Russian parliament, is considering his request for a parliamentary inquiry into the problems of the institute. Strakov says that his biggest concern is to stop the sacking of scientists. He says that the Palaeontological Institute has been acting prematurely in cutting staff, pointing out that none of the institutes in his branch of the academy — geology, geophysics and mining engineering — has yet started making people redundant.

The directors of the institute have declined to comment on the situation, pleading illness. They have also twice failed to turn up in court to defend themselves against an appeal for reinstatement and compensation by a former employee, Masha Hekker, who was sacked after being accused of "truancy from work". Hekker says she had received formal permission for a three-month leave of absence to carry out research in Brussels. Her case is being supported and financed by the International Commission on Human Rights.

Alexander Zhamoida, vice-president of the All-Russian Palaeontological Society, has replied to the scientists in an open letter. It agrees on the need "to prevent illegal actions" relating to the theft of fossils and other items of national heritage, but says that some members of an international working group for the return of the fossils "purposefully intend to discredit the Palaeontological Institute". It adds that "those who signed the letter are not acting with the noblest aims".

Alison Abbott