No red alert over conservation *Red Lists*

Sir — In a recent Commentary article (*Nature* **389,** 436; 1997), Nicholas Mrosovsky highlighted the continuing work within the Species Survival Commission's volunteer network to improve the transparency of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) *Red List* by compiling documentation detailing the scientific justifications for the 5,000-plus listings in the latest volume.

As a member of the Species Survival Commission (SSC), Mrosovsky is well aware that it is our intention to make the documentation substantiating the inclusion of a species in the *Red List* publicly available as soon as possible. It is our hope that this enormous task will soon be completed and posted on the evolving Red List Internet website. However, as the SSC is a network of volunteers who donate their time and effort, sometimes such initiatives take longer to accomplish than its more enthusiastic members would prefer.

We recognize that there is a great deal of interest in the documentation for listings such as *Eretmochelys imbricata* (the hawksbill sea turtle). We do not believe that *E. imbricata* belongs in the "data deficient" category, and plan to make available very soon the documentation supporting the current listing.

The IUCN *Red List of Threatened Animals*, soon to be joined by the *Red List of Threatened Plants*, has been a respected standard reference for many years, and we plan to keep it so for many years to come.

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Sir — Mrosovsky has expressed concern about the credibility of IUCN. But is the IUCN as a whole really to blame?

The IUCN assessment of the Cuban hawksbill turtle proposal at the tenth Conference of Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) was based largely on information provided by selected members of the voluntary IUCN-SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group (MTSG). (From 1982 to 1990 I was secretary general of CITES.) When MTSG members at that conference were given the opportunity to discuss their concerns publicly with the Cuban delegation, the group demonstrated a superficial understanding of the proposal, the scientific analyses upon which it was based and even the IUCN principles about sustainable use with which the proposal complies. Group members showed little interest in resolving problems with Cuba, and were clearly committed to advocacy against Cuba.

Why the MTSG should have adopted such a strong advocacy position against Cuba is unknown. The information provided for the IUCN assessment came mainly from US members of the MTSG, and the United States has a vested interest in Cuba being isolated economically. Perhaps the controversial issue of turtle excluder devices in the US shrimping industry makes it politically difficult to admit that some sea turtle species are not 'endangered'. The MTSG has been slow to adopt the concepts and philosophies of sustainable use, despite their increasing acceptance by other SSC specialist groups and by the IUCN itself.

Nevertheless, as Mrosovsky states, IUCN credibility with CITES has been adversely affected by the antics of the MTSG. More effective ways of filtering philosophical and political biases will need to be found if the IUCN assessments are to be treated seriously and with respect.

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Methyl bromide not so bad

Sir — The News story "Ozone treaty 'must tackle CFC smuggling'" is seriously misleading when it states that "Molecule for molecule, methyl bromide is considered at least 50 times more destructive to the ozone layer than chlorine from CFCs"[1].

Because of oceanic uptake and removal by oxygen–hydrogen radicals in the lower atmosphere, only about 4 per cent of methyl bromide molecules released at the surface survive the upward journey into the stratospheric ozone layer. Second, the dominant CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) have two or three chlorine atoms per molecule. Further, only about 35 per cent of atmospheric methyl bromide can be shown to be under human control[2]. Therefore, to say that atmospheric methyl bromide is 50 times more destructive than CFCs is incorrect and misleading, especially when focusing on anthropogenic effects. Once in the stratosphere, a bromine atom does destroy about 50 times as many ozone molecules as does a chlorine atom.

Atmospheric scientists understand this distinction but it may help many readers and non-scientist representatives to the Montreal Protocol to clarify this point.

Discoveries of the past several years demonstrate that removal of atmospheric methyl bromide is more rapid than had been thought, and imply the existence of unidentified sources. Are other human-controlled sources at play or are the missing sources mostly natural? Research on such questions should continue, partly because of the need to gauge how much ozone protection we purchase by banning the substance, and partly because the questions are becoming more intriguing. The spirit and provisions of the original Montreal Protocol demanded continued research and periodic assessments of the implications of new results. I hope that we can continue to exercise these provisions.

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1. Spurgeon, D. *Nature* **389,** 219 (1997).
2. Yvon-Lewis, S. A. & Butler, J. H., *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **24,** 1227–1230 (1997).

Surgical leadership

Sir — In his review of Stephen S. Hall's *A Commotion in the Blood: Life and Death in the Immune System* (*Nature* **388**, 841; 1997), Fred S. Rosen makes no attempt to conceal his bias about surgeons: "Coley was at heart a surgeon, a profession with a strong theatrical element that is basically in conflict with the painstaking details of data-gathering requisite for good science."

Here it is Rosen who is being theatrical because he lacks supporting data. Surgeons continue to make major scientific advances which are analysed with the same scrutiny as Rosen's own, earning not only peer-reviewed funding but also international recognition.

Perhaps Rosen is unaware that Joseph E. Murray, Charles B.Huggins, Emil T. Kocher and other Nobel prizewinners were all clinically active surgeons.

Rosen lists his affiliation as the Center for Blood Research in Boston. He ought to know that one of the intellectual giants on whose shoulders he stands was Dr Charles S. Drew. Drew, an African-American scientist who must have excelled at the painstaking details of data-gathering to father modern blood-banking, was first and foremost a surgeon.

Surgical leadership abounds in current science despite the pervasive bias that Rosen preaches.

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