

## South Korea accused of leaving birds out to dry in wetland project

**Tokyo** The South Korean government is in court this week to battle environmentalists over the country's largest land-reclamation project. Wildlife advocates say that the scheme ignores the plight of endangered birds.

The project, which began in 1991 and is 90% complete, involves building a 33-kilometre sea wall around the Saemangeum wetlands in the southwest of the country. Environmental groups won a court ruling in July, which called for an end to the work on the grounds that the land would not be agriculturally viable.

The government's appeal was due to begin this week, and a verdict is expected in a month's time. Critics say that the case calls into question South Korea's support for the Ramsar Convention — an agreement to protect wetlands — which it signed in 1997. The agricultural ministry counters that the region will sustain little damage, and will be able to support birds as well as grow rice.

Jeffrey McNeely, chief scientist at the World Conservation Union (IUCN), says that the project "would virtually destroy the value of the area as a fisheries production area and a wetland habitat for birds". Many birds listed as endangered by the IUCN, including the spotted greenshank and spoon-billed sandpiper, either reside in the region or use it as a migratory stopover.

## Reptile study will add scale to evolutionary genetics

**San Diego** Snakes and lizards are set to join the ranks of species that have their genomes probed for clues to their evolutionary pedigree.

An international research consortium will examine 50 key genes in more than 145 snake and lizard species, and compare them to equivalents in the human, mouse and pufferfish genomes. Teams at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, the University of Adelaide, Australia, and San Diego State University in California have been awarded US\$2.4 million for the analysis.



Look ahead: reptiles such as the grass snake may give us a better view of vertebrate evolution.

## Dig pinpoints scene of Donner cannibal legend

**San Francisco** Archaeologists believe they have unearthed the site of the dramatic final days of the Donner party, a legendary group of migrants who were stranded in the Sierra Nevada in 1846.

Historical accounts describe how 81 migrants led by the Donner family were crossing the region when early snows forced them to camp for the winter. They soon exhausted their provisions, and resorted to eating the flesh of their dead companions. About half of the group survived, including James and Margret Reed (pictured).

Julie Schablitsky, an archaeologist in Portland, Oregon, led a team that located the site based on previous excavations and artefacts unearthed by rodents. The fragments — a belt buckle, lead shot and pottery — date the site to the mid-1800s

and suggest a long-term encampment.

A bone found at the site should settle the matter, Schablitsky says. The finger-sized piece may be human, and shows hatchet marks, perhaps indicating cannibalism. Descendants of the camp's survivors have agreed to DNA testing that could match the bone to their ancestors.



By looking for genes in the scaly reptiles, biologists hope to paint a more complete picture of vertebrate evolution.

The study might even help in the treatment of snake bites, suggests project biologist Tod Reeder of San Diego State University, as antivenom from one species might be useful for treating bites from closely related ones.

## Europe bans deep-sea trawling to save coral

**Munich** In a bid to protect an ecologically valuable deep-sea environment from damage caused by commercial fishing, the European Commission (EC) has banned the use of bottom-trawled nets on the Darwin Mounds, the largest known British deepwater coral reefs.

Discovered near Scotland in 1998 during a survey for the oil industry, the mounds make up a unique marine habitat, covering around 100 square kilometres at a depth of about 1 km. Underwater video footage showed that the reefs were already critically damaged, possibly by French trawlers, which are known to have fished in the region.

After a request by Britain's fisheries ministry, the EC, which oversees fisheries off most of Europe's coastline, has now banned trawling in the area with immediate effect. It's the first time since the revision last December of the European Common Fisheries Policy that emergency measures have been adopted to protect marine ecosystems from damage caused by fishing.

## West Nile virus completes coast-to-coast journey

**San Francisco** The West Nile virus has reached the end of its westward march across the United States.

Health officials in California reported on 20 August that they had detected the virus in mosquitoes near the Salton Sea at the southern tip of the state. Blood tests of nearby flocks of 'sentinel' chickens have

also identified the virus.

Transmitted by mosquitoes, West Nile virus is lethal to many birds, and causes severe encephalitis in about 1% of infected humans. The latest reports provide the first evidence that the virus has established itself in California. Two previously reported human cases (see *Nature* 419, 240; 2002) are thought to have been brought in from outside the state.

The virus was expected to arrive on the west coast this summer after spreading westward since its introduction in New York in 1999. More human cases are expected to occur in California — the state's Imperial Valley near the Salton Sea is home to intensive agriculture and many outdoor workers.

## Sacked Los Alamos man wins cash payout

**Washington** A US\$1-million settlement has been handed to a whistleblowing former employee of Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. The University of California, which manages the lab, has paid the sum to Glenn Walp, who was sacked last year after exposing theft at the lab.

Walp leaked documents to the media, revealing credit-card fraud and missing equipment, and was fired in November. His dismissal, together with that of his colleague Steven Doran, created a political storm that led to the resignations of the lab's director John Browne and his deputy Joseph Salgado (see *Nature* 421, 99–100; 2003).

Walp says he hopes that the settlement will serve as a warning to other laboratories involved in US nuclear-weapons and security programmes. He is now looking for a new job and is writing a book on his experiences at Los Alamos.

Earlier this year, Doran settled for an undisclosed sum and now works as head of security for the University of California system.