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Saved? An international declaration aims to secure the future of wild great apes by 2015.

African nations rally to safeguard great apes

Hoping to save our closest kin from extinction, delegates at the first Intergovernmental Meeting on Great Apes signed a declaration on 9 September pledging to secure the future of all species and subspecies of great apes in the wild by 2015.

The signatories of the "Kinshasa Declaration", who gathered in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, include the governments of many of the countries where the apes live, as well as donor governments, conservation organizations, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

UNEP estimates that less than 10% of the apes' original forest home in Africa will be left by 2030. The declaration explicitly calls for poverty reduction and the promotion of sustainable livelihoods as a means of saving the apes, which are especially threatened by poaching and habitat clearing.

Mars Express gets boost despite instrument failure

There was both good and bad news last week for Europe's Mars Express spacecraft, which has been orbiting the Red Planet for nearly two years.

On 15 September, the European Space Agency's science programme committee decided to keep operating the spacecraft until at least November 2007. That's a two-year extension on its mission to study the martian surface and atmosphere.

But Mars Express also suffered a serious blow: the Planetary Fourier Spectrometer (PFS), one of seven instruments on board the orbiter, has been shut down after behaving erratically for months. The PFS measures carbon dioxide and trace elements in the martian atmosphere, and its detection

of elevated methane levels led some scientists to speculate about biological activity on Mars.

Without a working PFS, the source of the methane will be hard to pin down. A team of engineers from ESA, the Italian Space Agency and industry is looking into the problem.

NASA sketches out plans for return to the Moon

NASA has announced specifics of how it plans to return astronauts to the Moon, a vision laid out by President George W. Bush that is expected to cost some \$100 billion.

Under the plan, a lunar lander and booster would be launched into orbit atop a massive cargo rocket by 2018. A four-person crew would launch separately in a yet-to-be-designed crew exploration vehicle. Both vehicles would be based on existing shuttle technology.

The crew would rendezvous with the booster in Earth orbit and then travel to the Moon. In announcing the plan on 19 September, NASA administrator Michael Griffin said that the agency would pay for the vehicles using its existing budget and infrastructure.

Researchers say security law restricts freedoms

US scientists are challenging Department of Defense (DOD) rules that could restrict the flow of information in federally funded projects involving foreign nationals.

The DOD has long limited the access of foreign nationals to certain information and technologies on the grounds of national security. But only recently did the department learn that some DOD contract holders, including several universities, were unaware of these laws.

In July, the DOD proposed guidelines to reinforce the existing laws, but academics have spoken out against them. Critics note that the rules would require separate work

areas and badges for certain projects involving scientists from other countries. The critics argue that such rules would limit academic freedom.

"Enforcing the controls would be nearly impossible," wrote Vartkess Apkarian, chair of the chemistry department at the University of California, Irvine, in a comment sent to the DOD. "The only choice I would have as a department chair is to reject any foreign student subject to" the laws.

At a workshop at the National Academies last week, DOD officials said the rules would probably change in response to comments received by the deadline, which has been extended to 12 October. Comments can be submitted by visiting www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/dars/publiccomm/index.htm

Creativity wins the day in US prize awards

A pharmacist, a lobster fisherman and a violin-maker are among this year's 25 recipients of MacArthur fellowships, a set of US\$500,000 grants awarded to promising creative individuals.

Pharmacist Michael Cohen, president of the Institute for Safe Medication Practices in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania, has championed changes in drug naming to help avoid patients being accidentally given the wrong prescription. Lobster fisherman and biochemist Ted Ames, based in Stonington, Maine, aims to combine scientific analysis with his decades of hands-on experience to develop new strategies for managing fisheries on the US east coast.

Also featured on this year's list are Joseph Curtin, a violin-maker based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, who is seeking to use twenty-first-century materials and techniques to build better instruments, and Claire Gmachl, a laser technologist at Princeton University whose work could lead to new techniques for environmental monitoring and clinical diagnosis.

Film project tracks butterflies across North America

Stay tuned for the latest animal film stars: monarch butterflies. This ultralight airplane, dubbed Papalotzin, is following and filming the migration of monarchs across North America this year.

Monarchs are approaching the peak of their annual migration, which takes them from Canada and the northern United States to California and Mexico for the winter. Conservationists hope that the film, being shot from the two-person ultralight, will raise awareness of the need to save ecosystems along the butterflies' flight path.

www.papalotzin.com



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