Upstart forum created for German conferences

Several key players in the prestigious but troubled Dahlem Conferences, which have organized some 90 international, multidisciplinary meetings in Berlin since 1974, have resurfaced in Frankfurt as founders of a new forum. The FIAS forum, based at the Frankfurt Institute for Advanced Studies, is meant to restore "the format and philosophy of the original Dahlem Workshop model," the founders say.

Dahlem was integrated into the Free University Berlin in 1990. Troubles surfaced publicly in early 2005 when several senior scientists threatened to resign from the Dahlem board in protest against the firing of programme director Julia Lupp by Free University administrators (see *Nature* 443, 446; 2005). The protestors also alleged that Free University administrative actions had slowed down publication of manuscripts and undermined Dahlem's independence.

Lupp is now in Frankfurt, as programme director and series editor for the new forum. The forum will organize three or four workshops a year with "the same broad focus of the Dahlem workshops," says Wolf Singer, a director of the Max Planck Institute for Brain Research in Frankfurt, and a driving force behind the new forum.

MIT team calls for carbon storage underground

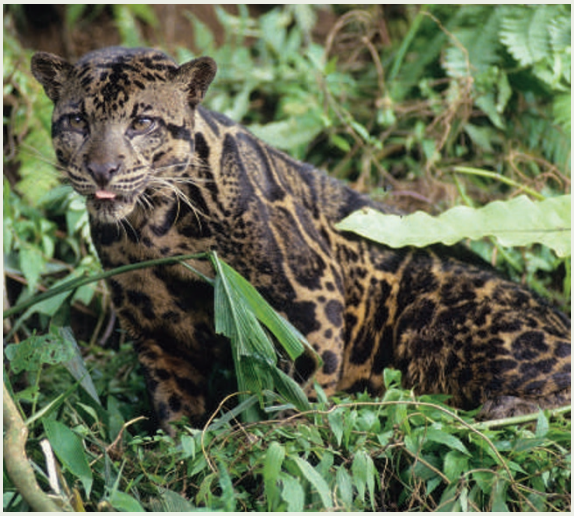
Carbon from coal-burning power plants must be pumped underground to stop it contributing to climate change, according to a report, *The Future of Coal*, from scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. The team used a computer model to simulate a world in which carbon emissions come at a price. When the cost to emit a tonne of carbon reaches about US$30, it will begin to make economic sense to pay for it to be sequestered underground, the study found.

The authors call for the construction of up to five large-scale installations, in different locations with different geologies, to show that carbon sequestering can work well. Current projects, they say, are too small and are not monitored well enough to provide useful information.

L. LEE PHOTOGRAPHY/CORBIS

Several new techniques are being tested to store carbon emissions.

Changing spots



A. COMPOST/WWF-CANON

The clouded leopard found on Borneo and Sumatra is an elusive, reclusive creature that lives in mountainous rainforest. So perhaps it is not a surprise that scientists have only now realized that this leopard is a different species than the clouded leopard of mainland Southeast Asia.

Genetic tests done at the US National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, suggest that Borneo's clouded leopard diverged from the mainland cat some 1.4 million years ago. Comparative studies of skins and furs held in museums also support the idea of separate species, say Andrew Kitchener of the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh and his colleagues in a recent paper in *Current Biology*.

In Borneo, the last holdout of the clouded leopard is an area of rainforest the size of Kansas, which government officials last month signed an agreement to protect.

Big donor cuts Stanford cash because of oil ads

Gatherings of California's Bing family, the mega-donors to Stanford University, could have more energy now that the son has withdrawn a gift of $2.5 million promised to the university his father supports.

Hollywood movie producer Steve Bing last week withdrew the final instalment of a $25-million pledge to the university. A major backer of alternative energy, he rescinded the loan after citing television ads by oil giant ExxonMobil that hyped its own $100-million research grants to Stanford.

His parents, Helen and Peter Bing, have pledged more than $85 million to Stanford, where Peter Bing served on the board for 31 years, including five as chairman. Steve Bing is now calling on others to halt gifts to Stanford, an aide said.

Microsoft provides cash for synthetic biology

The burgeoning field of synthetic biology has a new supporter: Bill Gates.

On 13 March, Microsoft Research in Richmond, Washington, announced the award of $570,000 to six scientists in the United States and Canada to "stimulate foundational research in synthetic biology and DNA nanotechnology by identifying and addressing the unique computational challenges of these areas". The grants will support projects that take computational approaches to tackle biological problems, such as rational gene, genome and protein design and construction.

One grant will help Herbert Sauro of the University of Washington in Seattle build a software tool to aid the assembly of biological devices. 'Plug-and-play' assembly of such devices has been hampered by a lack of standardized information about each biological part created by scientists. Sauro therefore hopes to use part of his grant to start working towards a consensus on design standards.

Germany counts the cost of climate change

Climate change could cost the German economy up to €800 billion (US$1.1 trillion) by 2050, according to a study by the Berlin-based German Institute for Economic Research (DIW).

The authors modelled the effects of a 4.5 °C warming on all economic sectors. Unstopped warming would cause an average loss of 0.5% in national economic growth per year, they conclude.

Few studies on the economic effect of climate change go down to the level of individual countries. The *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change*, published last year, predicts long-term global economic losses of 5–20% if nothing is done to slow global warming (see *Nature* 444, 6–7; 2006). The less pessimistic predictions by the DIW are based on 'damage functions' developed by Richard Tol of Princeton University, who says that the *Stern Review* over-estimates the future costs of global warming.

FDA proposes tighter rules on conflicts of interest

After a flurry of criticism for perceived conflicts of interest, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is planning to significantly tighten the rules that govern when financial conflicts should exclude experts from serving on its external advisory committees. The committees are important because the agency nearly always follows their advice on approving drugs and devices and on emerging safety issues.

In its draft policy released on 21 March, the FDA said that individuals will generally be excluded from participating on advisory committees if they have financial interests exceeding $50,000 in the issue being discussed. Experts with financial interests of less than $50,000 might be allowed to participate in discussions without voting, the agency said. The draft proposal is open for public comment until 21 May.

Flu study faces shake-up over industry funding

Japan's health ministry is expected to remove two researchers from its eight-member study group on influenza, because their research in other areas was partly funded by a Japanese distributor of the flu drug Tamiflu.

The study of some 10,000 children will investigate the possible side effects of Tamiflu (oseltamivir) as part of its remit.

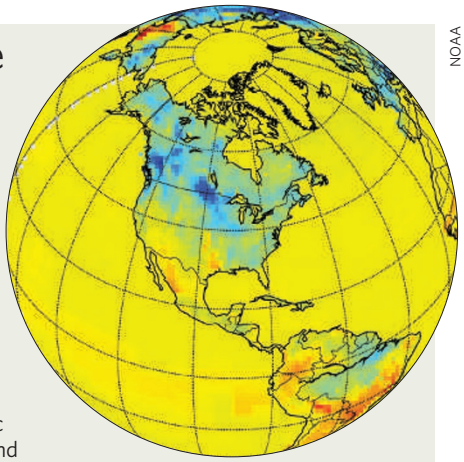
The health ministry last week warned doctors not to give Tamiflu to teenagers, after a number of new reports linked the drug to psychiatric effects such as suicidal tendencies among the age group (see *Nature* doi:10.1038/446358a; 2007). Swiss drug firm Roche, which makes Tamiflu, says that no such causal link has been established, and the World Health Organization says Tamiflu remains the drug of choice for treating people infected with the bird flu virus H5N1.

Shunpei Yokota of Yokohama City University, the study group's leader, and Tsuneo Morishima of Okayama University have received some ¥12 million (US$100,000) between them from Tokyo-based Chugai Pharmaceutical, which distributes products for Roche. Health minister Hakuo Yanagisawa told a parliamentary committee on 23 March that the researchers ought to be excluded from the flu study.

KYODO/NEWSCOM

The Japanese government wants to investigate the possible side effects of flu drug Tamiflu.

On the track of carbon dioxide



NOAA

It's still pretty raw, but an online tool to track carbon dioxide emissions is being set up by the US government. The new CarbonTracker website (http://carbontracker.noaa.gov) is meant to provide a public-friendly view of greenhouse-gas emissions from various sources around the world. The snapshot on the right shows CO_2 uptake for a week in July 2005 — dark blue represents the strongest CO_2 sinks.

So far, though, the data are sparse. Only 60 carbon monitoring sites worldwide are included, with 20 of them in the United States. Project scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration say they hope to add further sites and eventually develop CarbonTracker into a resource for policy-makers and scientists.

UK league table revisits problems caused by drugs

Alcohol and tobacco are better than heroin but worse than cannabis, according to a UK ranking of the dangers of recreational drugs (D. Nutt *et al. Lancet* 369, 1047–1053; 2007).

The new system is an attempt to provide a scientific — if still simplistic — way to compare the social and health tolls taken by recreational drugs. Current British drug laws are shaped by political prejudice as much as by the actual threats posed by the substances, says team member David Nutt of the University of Bristol.

His team asked experts — including psychiatrists specializing in addiction, the police, forensic experts and doctors — to give up to 20 drugs a score in nine subcategories within the larger categories of physical harm, dependence and social harm.

The result? Heroin and cocaine were ranked as the most dangerous, reflecting their status as class A drugs — the most harmful tier of Britain's three-category system. But ecstasy, another class A drug, finished eighteenth in their list — below commercial solvents and anabolic steroids.

Budget gives Canadian science a cash injection

Canada's science infrastructure got a boost last week with the release of the country's budget plan for 2007.

The two main science granting agencies — the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research — will each get an extra Can$37 million (US$32 million), raising their combined budgets to roughly Can$1.4 billion. A further Can$510 million is allocated to modernize the research infrastructure at universities and other research institutions. And Genome Canada will receive an extra Can$100 million for grants and regional genome centres.

Another winner, to the tune of Can$50 million, is the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Waterloo, Ontario. Seven other targeted institutes, including some focusing on neurology and sustainable energy, will share an extra Can$105 million.

SpaceX rocket burns up after missing orbit

The privately financed Falcon 1 launch vehicle reached an altitude of 300 kilometres last week before developing problems and burning up on re-entry into Earth's atmosphere. But space-industry experts say the test should be considered a success.

Falcon 1 was developed by the California-based company SpaceX as a rapid way of getting satellites into orbit. Space launches usually take months of planning, but industry observers say Falcon 1 should be turned around quickly because SpaceX has used a simple design that the firm says will eventually be operated by as few as 15 staff.

SpaceX is investigating why the Falcon 1 vehicle developed a rolling motion during the flight, which caused its engines to shut down, about 6 minutes after launching from the Marshall Islands on 20 March. The company is still aiming for another launch later this year to put a US Department of Defense satellite into orbit.

Correction

Our News in Brief story 'Upstart forum created for German conferences' (*Nature* **446,** 360; 2007) contained an incorrect reference to an earlier story on the topic. The correct reference is *Nature* **433,** 446 (2005).