

WORDWATCH

Melody roads

At last, bored Japanese drivers have a way to amuse themselves. Engineers from Hokkaido have created roads with grooves at varying intervals, which produce a series of 'notes' as cars pass over them. It could even help cut speeding — the tunes apparently sound best at 45 kilometres per hour.

ZOO NEWS

Tiger trauma

Animal activists have slammed the Bing Chuan wild-animal park in Shenyang, China, after four of the park's tigers killed another and ate it. The attack has been blamed on inadequate food supplies for the animals, which usually get 5 kilograms of chicken or beef a day. Cold weather has caused revenue from visitors to dwindle, say officials, and rations for the animals have dwindled with them.

3 GOOD REASONS...

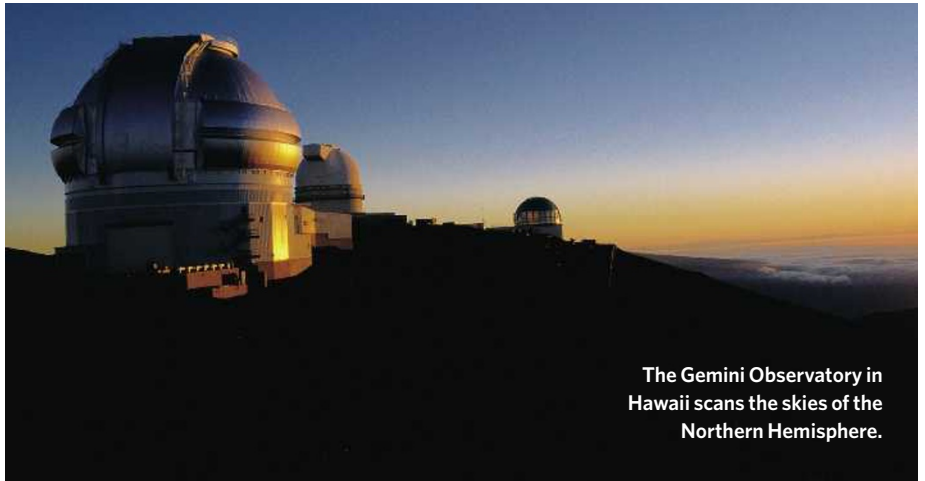
To let the robots take over

1 An end to the misery of cockroach infestation: Swiss and Belgian roboteers have created a 'Pied Piper' robot (pictured below) that can influence the insects and 'herd' them into a desired area.

2 Fun theme parks: South Korea is to build two robot theme parks by 2013, allowing people to meet and interact with their electronic counterparts.

3 Freedom from wrist pain: a German calligraphy-bot has been programmed to write out the entire Martin Luther Bible.

Sources: Guardian, AP, Science, Networkworld.com, Sawse.com



The Gemini Observatory in Hawaii scans the skies of the Northern Hemisphere.

UK astronomers stunned by Gemini withdrawal

The United Kingdom has abruptly announced its intention to withdraw from the Gemini Observatory, potentially leaving hundreds of British astronomers without a major telescope in the Northern Hemisphere.

The Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) said on 15 November that it would pull out of the international observatory, with its twin 8-metre telescopes in Chile and Hawaii. The STFC, one of seven UK national research councils, pays for major physics and astronomy projects. It has nearly a quarter stake in Gemini and pays annual subscription fees of £4 million (US\$8.2 million).

The British astronomical community has reacted with shock and dismay. "It's a mistake," says Royal Astronomical Society president Michael Rowan-Robinson. "I think it damages our ability to do multi-wavelength astronomy."

UK astronomers were not consulted before the decision, says Roger Davies, an astrophysicist at the University of Oxford and former Gemini board chair. "I was shocked," he adds. "Gemini is a world-ranked facility — it's our only access to the Northern Hemisphere."

Astronomers in the United Kingdom can still use the Southern Hemisphere telescopes of the European Southern Observatory in Chile. Rowan-Robinson wants the STFC to negotiate a partial partnership with Gemini that would allow them to retain observation time in Hawaii.

The Gemini observatories opened in 1999 (north) and 2001 (south), with capabilities

in both the optical and infrared wavelength ranges. The infrared allows astronomers to peer deep into the ancient corners of the Universe. As part of the Gemini Deep Survey, astronomers discovered that young galaxies, forming 3 billion to 6 billion years after the Big Bang, were bigger and more mature than previously thought (K. Glazebrook *et al. Nature* **430**, 181–184; 2004). Other Gemini member countries include the United States, Canada, Australia, Argentina, Brazil and Chile.

The STFC announced its intention at the Gemini board meeting in La Serena, Chile. On

21 November, it must inform its own governing council on how it plans to save £80 million in the next three years. "In this financial climate, we are staring very hard at our programmes," says spokesman Peter Barratt.

The STFC paid £30 million between 1994 and 2001 towards Gemini's construction. By leaving the observatory, the council would pay a penalty of £8 million. UK astronomers would immediately forfeit their observation time, which was 23% of the available time on each telescope, or about 70 nights of the year.

The Gemini board issued a statement on 16 November saying it was confident that it could resolve the funding without interrupting operations. Wayne Van Citters, a Gemini board member from the National Science Foundation, the US funding body, noted that the STFC had not yet formally given notice. There could still be room to negotiate, he says.

Eric Hand

"In this financial climate, we are staring very hard at our programmes."