

# Neuroscientists see red over Dalai Lama

A growing number of neuroscientists are calling for the cancellation of a special lecture to be given by the Dalai Lama in November. The Buddhist leader is due to speak at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) in Washington DC, but a petition against the talk has already gathered some 50 signatures.

The Dalai Lama has lived in exile in India since he fled Chinese troops in Tibet in 1959. Over the past decade he has increasingly encouraged researchers, sometimes at gatherings at his home, to study whether Tibetan Buddhist meditation can reshape the brain and increase mental well-being (see *Nature* 432, 670; 2005). It was during one of these meetings that he was asked by a member of the society's executive committee, to give an inaugural lecture on 'the study of empathy and compassion, and how meditation affects brain activity'.

Some of the critics believe that the Dalai Lama's lecture should be ruled out because of his status as a political and religious figure. "One of the reasons for inviting him is that he has views on controlling negative emotions, which is a legitimate area for neuroscience research in the future," says Robert Desimone, director of the McGovern Institute for Brain Research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But "the SfN needs to distance itself as much as it can from the Dalai Lama and his beliefs", adds Desimone, who opposes the lecture but has not yet signed the petition.

Many of the scientists who initiated the protest are of Chinese origin. But they insist

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Food for thought: the Dalai Lama is interested in the biological effects that meditation may have on the brain.

that their concerns are purely scientific. Yi Rao a neuroscientist at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois, helped to draft the petition, which says that the science of meditation is "a subject with hyperbolic claims, limited research and compromised scientific rigour".

The letter singles out one of the key publica-

tions in the analysis of meditation, in which Richard Davidson, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and his colleagues claim that neural networks are better coordinated in people who are practised in meditation (*A. Lutz et al. Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* 101, 16369–16373; 2004).

Rao says that the study is flawed, especially in terms of the controls it used, because it compared practising monks in their thirties and forties with much younger university students. "Davidson is a respectable scientist," he says, "but he has put his respectability on the line with this."

Davidson defends his work as the first step in a new field. "Meditation research is in its infancy," he says. He helped to arrange the Dalai Lama's talk at the SfN meeting, to be held on 12–16 November. He says that criticism of the lecture on scientific grounds is misplaced, because the Dalai Lama is not claiming to be a scientist. "He merely wants to increase scientific attention on the topics that he thinks are important for human welfare," Davidson says.

The lecture is the first in a new series organized by the SfN, billed as "dialogues between neuroscience and society". The controversy has ensured that dialogue is already off to a rocky start.

The SfN's president, Carol Barnes, says that she is trying to find a resolution to the protest that will not involve cancelling the lecture. But one of the petition's organizers, Jianguo Gu of the University of Florida, says that he and several other scientists will cancel their lectures if the Dalai Lama's talk goes ahead. ■

David Cyranoski

## Biodiversity and climate form focus of forest canopy plan

### LONDON

Conservation researchers last week announced a plan to create a global network of rainforest research stations. If it secures funding, they say that the network would boost knowledge about biodiversity in the forest canopy, and help track the effects of climate change.

The project, run by the Global Canopy Programme at the University of Oxford, UK, would recruit local workers and give them the equipment and skills needed to study the canopies of their home forests. Results from the stations would be compiled to give a

global picture of the state of forest canopies.

One focus will be biodiversity — ecologists want to refine their estimate that the canopies contain 40% of all terrestrial species. The stations will also look for changes in how much carbon dioxide is taken up by forests — an 'early warning' of the effects of global warming. Climatologists fear that as temperatures rise and forested regions become drier, forest growth may slow and the trees' capacity for soaking up carbon dioxide will diminish.

The project aims to set up five new stations in Brazil, Ghana, Madagascar,

Malaysia and India, to complement ten that already exist in forests around the world.

The plan is backed by the United Nations, which has already called for a world network of 20 canopy stations. Now the proponents, from 15 universities and research centres around the world, just need the money.

The stations should cost about US\$18 million, the project's head, Andrew Mitchell, told a meeting on the Amazon Rainforest at the House of Commons in London on 21 July. "Compared to, say space exploration, it's a piffling amount of money," he said. ■

Michael Hopkin