

Australia hands cache of fossils back to China

A two-year investigation by Australian police has led to around 10,000 fossils that had been illegally smuggled being returned to China.

The haul is estimated to be worth nearly US\$4 million. It includes undescribed material of scientific importance as well as common specimens such as dinosaur eggs, says John Long, a palaeontologist at the Museum Victoria in Melbourne who assisted the authorities with the fossil inventory. The material was returned late last month. Australian officials are now focusing on possible illegal trade with Argentina, and may launch a similar probe into fossils removed from Brazil, adds Long.

Fossils from China are classed as national treasures that cannot be sold without government permission, but many specimens enter the black market after being unearthed by local people. Although there have been isolated seizures of smuggled fossils in countries around the world, no other nation has undertaken the aggressive approach of Australia.

Depleted stocks prompt call to ban shark fishing

Fisheries researchers have called for a complete overhaul of deep-sea fishing and an immediate ban on catching deep-water sharks.

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), an intergovernmental organization that advises 19 nations, made the call on 17 October after a 20-day survey revealed that shark stocks in some regions are highly depleted. Up to 50 vessels are operating in largely unregulated deep-water fisheries to the west and north of Britain and Ireland, dropping nets that are left unattended for up to ten days. Some nets are ultimately abandoned, and go on to kill large numbers of sharks and other fish.

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IMAGE
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REASONS

Sinking fast: stocks of the spurdog shark have fallen to dangerously low levels.

Darwin's body of work evolves into online archive

The complete works of Charles Darwin are to be made available online for the first time. The archive will include 42 volumes written or edited by Darwin and hundreds of shorter publications such as journal articles. Darwin's private notebooks, in which he recorded the observations and thoughts that led to his theory of evolution, will also be digitized. The documents will be available both as searchable text and exact reproductions.

The project, based at the University of Cambridge, UK, will launch its website in December. Project scientists also plan to include translations of some of the works into other languages. The £250,000 (US\$440,000) needed to fund the scheme was provided by Britain's Arts and Humanities Research Council. <http://darwin-online.org.uk>

With some species such as the spurdog shark (*Squalus acanthias*) depleted to record lows, ICES scientists report that populations of the more sensitive shark species are in danger of collapse.

Yale hit by discrimination row over Chinese graduate

Graduate students have accused Yale University of discrimination after a graduate in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology was asked to leave the university because of her poor academic standing.

Xuemei Han maintains that she met all the academic requirements, and claims that members of the department felt uncomfortable working with a Chinese student. The grievance, filed with the dean's office on 20 October, was signed by more than 300 graduate students and scholars. The signatories allege that Chinese graduate students consistently face intimidation, erroneous reporting of academic performance, and other discriminatory treatment.

"This type of unfair treatment of Chinese students happens all the time at Yale: every year, every semester," says Han. University officials deny any wrong-doing and say they will seriously consider Han's complaint.

German researchers angry at plan to expand ministry

Science organizations in Germany have hit out at plans to hand responsibility for some areas of research to new economics minister Edmund Stoiber.

Stoiber — a former prime minister of Bavaria — says he wants to expand his ministry to cover both economics and technology. His plans involve taking

control of research programmes in future technologies such as space and nanotechnology.

The proposal is currently being discussed by the parties involved in negotiations on the make-up of the new coalition government, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel. Scientists fear that splitting research between ministries would make it complicated to run interdisciplinary research programmes and hamper efforts to encourage basic and applied researchers to work together.

"Dividing responsibilities for research between ministries would endanger our ability to be innovative," says Jürgen Mlynek, president of the Helmholtz Association, which runs Germany's 15 national research centres.

Europe's nascent research council takes shape

The proposed European Research Council (ERC) will be run by a scientist, not a bureaucrat, the first meeting of the ERC's Scientific Council has decided.

The decision, made on 18–19 October, is likely to be welcomed by many European researchers. The ERC will be the first Europe-wide basic-research agency, and is designed in part to reduce the bureaucratic burden associated with the European Union's Framework research programme. Some officials involved in the plans for the ERC, which is due to start up in 2007, had wanted it run by a bureaucrat seconded from a national research agency.

Researchers at the meeting also confirmed that the ERC is to fund basic research across all academic fields, and endorsed plans for an executive agency, under the aegis of the European Commission, to implement all ERC activities.