

Researchers fight poaching with presence, not guns

SIR — Your News Feature ‘Peaceful primates, violent acts’ (*Nature* **447**, 635–636; 2007) reports on the conflicts that arise when wild animals studied for research are threatened by poaching and the bush-meat trade. Regional and international conservation organizations can help, but sometimes individual researchers feel that more immediate measures are required. Local presence has been shown to be one of the most efficient conservation actions, and many research programmes, including the bonobo research project of the Max Planck Institute, have taken risks in continuing to work even when unrest prevails.

You tell the story of Jonas Eriksson, a PhD student who left his academic career to engage in an unusual form of conservation action. From your report, readers may have gained the impression that Eriksson has been engaging in firefights using guns obtained illegally, but this was not the case. The aim of the project was to strengthen the capacity of the guards of the Congolese wildlife authority (ICCN) and to lead joint patrols of villagers and park guards into areas of Salonga National Park where poachers operate. The guards from ICCN are armed with automatic weapons that are owned by the wildlife authority, with a mandate to use them for law enforcement.

We emphasize that the anti-poaching project is neither typical nor representative of the work of the Max Planck Society. Researchers at LuiKotal, in Salonga National Park, have never been armed. Carrying arms would violate national and international laws, and would be counterproductive to the goals of our research.

Conservation and research have to go hand in hand, without weapons. The pressures that we can exert are physical presence and a strong motivation to protect those who provide us with the information we seek. This is what Eriksson did when he started his Salonga mission, and it is what other researchers from our institute do at their field sites across the African continent.

Gottfried Hohmann

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Estimating the cost of climate change

SIR — Your News in Brief story ‘Germany counts the costs of climate change’ (*Nature* **446**, 360; 2007) reports the conclusions of a study by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) that you state is based on my

work. This is not correct. As I had previously documented (R. Roson and R. Tol *Integr. Assess.* **6**, 75–82; 2006), the DIW model is based on egregious misinterpretation of my work.

The German gross domestic product (GDP) was about €2,000 billion (US\$2,700 billion) in 2006. If the German economy grows by 1.65% per year without climate change and 0.5% slower with climate change, as the DIW study suggests, then the gap between the two scenarios is the €800 billion in 2050 that you reported. This corresponds to 20% of German GDP in 2050, without climate change. This is at the upper end of the range of the *Stern Review*. However, you call the DIW study “less pessimistic” than the *Stern Review*.

You are correct to say that my estimates of the impacts of climate change are lower than those of the *Stern Review*, and, by implication, the DIW study. Indeed, as I showed earlier (R. Tol *Energy Policy* **33**, 2064–2074; 2005), peer-reviewed estimates are lower than estimates in the grey literature. Neither the DIW study nor the *Stern Review* were reviewed by independent peers.

Richard Tol

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Not so sunny view of the events in Arizona

SIR — You seem so bedazzled by President Michael Crow’s brutal reshaping (‘The Arizona Experiment’ *Nature* **446**, 968–970; 2007) of Arizona State University (ASU) that I could not help thinking of Stephen Poliakoff’s *Blinded by the Sun*, a play depicting the cold-fusion debacle. Your comment “Take Robert Pettit — a chemist and long-time director of the Cancer Research Institute at ASU until he lost the position in 2005” hardly touches on the ferociousness of President Crow and the events you describe. John C. Knight, in Correspondence, described those events differently (*Nature* **447**, 528; 2007).

Pettit is probably one of the most prolific and productive scientists at ASU. He has published more than 750 articles in the cancer field, and was responsible through his own prodigious funding efforts for the construction, maintenance, operation and staffing of the institute. The efforts of Pettit, his students and collaborators are known worldwide, thanks to their investigations during the past 30 years of the anti-cancer properties of natural marine products. The institute brought more funds to ASU, through its patent income, than any other inventor.

Pettit’s institute was closed with startling lack of notice and the staff of more than 60

people were marched out of the building on 27 January 2006 by security personnel (see *Chemical and Engineering News* **10**, 6 February 2006). In terms of harsh abruptness, this step must be unprecedented in US academic history.

A pending, multi-million dollar suit against Crow and ASU filed by the Government Accountability Project with the US District Court in Phoenix may yet shed light on this sorry affair.

More often than not, excessive sunshine produces sunburn, some of it even fatal.

Carl Djerassi

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Why are people reluctant to join in open review?

SIR — I was excited when *Nature* launched its trial for open peer review last year, but disappointed by the outcome (see <http://blogs.nature.com/nature/peerreview/trial>). I have also been tracking the progress of another open review journal, *Biology Direct* (www.biology-direct.com; see article in *Nature’s* peer-review debate at www.nature.com/nature/peerreview/debate/nature05005.html). Even after a high-profile launch with guaranteed indexing by PubMed, this journal has published only 52 articles and received only two comments over 16 months.

In contrast to *Biology Direct*, another journal that offers open commenting, *PLoS One* (www.plosone.org), has published 1,189 articles in its first six months. But has *PLoS One* achieved its stated goal of post-publication open comments? I find that even the ‘most annotated’ category of articles usually receives just a few comments. The journal has recently replaced its ‘most annotated’ with a ‘recently annotated’ category. A check of all ‘recently annotated’ articles demonstrates that their commenting rates are low (zero or just a few), even for articles that are likely to have broad appeal and/or are in ‘hot’ research areas.

Why is there a general lack of interest among the scientific community in open commenting on submitted or published papers? I believe there are two main reasons. First, participation does not earn any tangible credit or benefit for the reviewers and commentators. Second, publicly critical comments are a risk for those who make them.

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Science publishing issues are regularly featured at Nautilus (<http://blogs.nature.com/nautilus>), where debate is welcomed.

Nobel laureates know what they're talking about

SIR — Your Editorial 'Nobels in dubious causes' (*Nature* 447, 354; 2007) urges scientists and Nobel laureates to "campaign only where they can truly make a difference". I think you mean that we should use our fleeting fame only in causes that we know something about. Or, as Pliny the Elder put it: "Shoemaker, stick to your last".

A few laureates may sign too many things. However, as a founder and board member of Scientists and Engineers for America, I use my Nobel prize to discuss something I know a good deal about.

Our aim is to make available to society at large the evidence-based science relating to critical issues facing us all. There is a lot of shouting out there and it is hard for the layperson to find reality. Political affiliation does not matter to us. Both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates endorse corn-based ethanol as an energy source. Both are wrong; it is our job to call it mainly a farm subsidy and explain why it is that rather than what it is claimed to be. It is up to the public to decide how much to support it.

We are also educating scientists on how to run for school boards. We hope many of them will win, and in this way improve the poor state of science education in our schools and keep it focused on the real world.

We intend to inform the electorate of the science-based issues that their elected officials have to face, and of what actions these officials have taken. We also intend to summarize the science behind the issues, including what we know and what we don't know. We hope both to draw attention to under-appreciated science issues and provide the advocacy necessary to get things done — not along party-political lines, but scientifically.

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Nobel: politicians need the insights scientists can give

SIR — As a member of the board of directors for Scientists and Engineers for America (SEA) and president of the Federation of American Scientists, two organizations mentioned in your Editorial 'Nobels in dubious causes' (*Nature* 447, 354; 2007), I must take exception to your argument that scientists should not overstep their expertise.

In matters of interior decoration you'd be as likely to get good advice from a person pulled at random off the streets of Glasgow as from a gaggle of Nobel laureates. But eminent

scientists bring much-needed perspectives and insight to policy decisions that hinge on scientific facts and methods, and the uncertainties associated with them. Many of the most difficult political issues today — such as climate change, securing nuclear materials, setting priorities in health research and many others — are intimately tied to issues in science.

Given the cacophony of biased and misleading information that dominates many of these debates, the kind of advice and leadership provided by scientists is essential.

How could it be considered 'dubious' for scientists to defend and explain the process of scientific inquiry, when elected officials are making technical decisions based on the advice of novelists and religious extremists? SEA was organized to ensure that candidates' positions on critical science-policy matters are easily available, clearly understood and openly debated.

Your Editorial implies that this essential public service is inappropriate. On the contrary, it would be a terrible mistake if scientists with information critical to the debate retreat to ivory towers. Scientists have a responsibility to bring relevant facts to light, provide early warnings of problems that scientists are uniquely able to see and suggest solutions that might otherwise not enter the debate.

Henry Kelly

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How a naturalist found safe colours for soldiers

SIR — I enjoyed the Science in Culture article 'Hidden talent' about the London exhibition exploring the art of camouflage and its military implications (*Nature* 447, 148; 2007). It reminded me of a little-known Englishman who made contributions to both zoology and military camouflage.

Charles Hamilton Smith (1776–1859), a colonel in the British Army, was a naturalist who described several equine species and subspecies — now mostly synonymized with *Equus* — and wrote an important volume in William Jardine's Naturalist's Library series (*The Natural History of Horses* Lizards, Edinburgh, 1841). Charles Darwin cited this work in his *Origin of Species*, in connection with hybridism and equine striping patterns.

Hamilton Smith is also known to military historians for his experiment conducted in 1800 on the colour of soldiers' field uniforms. The experiment involved soldiers firing at targets of different colours, including the conspicuous red of the British soldier's field uniform. This colour was more than twice

as likely as grey to receive a bullet-hole. Hamilton Smith submitted a report concluding that "the question arises whether all riflemen and light infantry should not take the field in some grey unostentatious uniform, leaving the parade dress for peace and garrison duty" (published later in the Royal Engineers' *Aide Memoire to the Military Sciences*, Weale, London, 1853).

Although some sections of the army readily took up Hamilton Smith's recommendations, cryptic coloration in British field uniforms was not fully adopted until the Boer War, at the end of the nineteenth century. Hamilton Smith was born in the year of the US declaration of independence; had someone conducted his experiment before that time — and had the British authorities been more willing to respond — history might have taken a rather different turn.

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Post-publication review could aid skills and quality

SIR — Shi V. Liu's correspondence, 'Why are people reluctant to join in open review?' (*Nature* 447, 1052; 2007), struck a chord. Recently, I stayed my hand before submitting a comment to an online article, because the comment included as-yet unpublished research that I was reluctant to reveal in such a forum.

I believe that there are two ways to encourage online commenting. These would require little additional commitment, but would improve journal quality and enhance the development of review skills among young scientists.

First, journals could institute periodic post-publication review, in which the journal would solicit formal review of the article, focusing on how well its methods and results have held up, given the research that has been published in the intervening period. Such reviews would provide valuable historical perspective. Second, young scientists participating in journal clubs could be asked to derive and post a consensus comment on the article under discussion.

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Correction

PLoS One published just over 550 articles during its first six months, not 1,189 as stated in Correspondence 'Why are people reluctant to join in open review?' (*Nature* 447, 1052; 2007).