

MOVERS

David Schimel, chief executive, National Ecological Observatory Network, Washington DC



1992-2006:
Senior scientist, National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, Colorado

David Schimel has a reputation among his colleagues for his quick-witted turns of phrase. "Our telescope points everywhere at once" is one example of his quirky sense of humour. Phrases such as this — an allusion to how the Hubble telescope compares with the National Ecological Observatory Network's (NEON's) planned array of numerous sensors — are now becoming part of the fabric of the fledgling network, headquartered in Washington DC. Last November, Schimel was appointed as chief executive of the network, which will see a set of sensors and facilities monitor ecosystems throughout the United States.

This might sound like a curious post for a former linguistics student, but Schimel's brush with ecology — when he enrolled in a course to prepare for backpacking and camping trips — began a romance with natural science. He went on to major in biology and later added a degree in mathematics, once he realized that a quantitative approach was important to his work. After two years at the Marine Biological Laboratory's Ecosystems Center in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, and a PhD on grasslands at Colorado State University, Schimel joined the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, Colorado, in 1992.

It was during an almost six-year hiatus from NCAR, at the Max Planck Society in Germany and the International Ecology Institute, that Schimel gained a deeper understanding of the culture of European ecology, which includes lots of collaborative projects involving networks of sites, a hallmark of NEON. "We will have to find a way to emphasize people's individual creativity and mix it with collaborative building of the network," says Schimel.

NEON is tentatively scheduled to be operational by 2013, and will process data from 20 stations throughout the United States. One of the instruments at its disposal, for example, will be a 10-metre tower to measure carbon dioxide flux, detect nitrogen oxides and record leaf wetness.

But NEON has been criticized by some as being poorly designed and not worth the expense (see *Nature* 444, 420-421; 2006). Schimel says the scientific community will assess NEON's usefulness by, for example, how well the project monitors land use, the presence of invasive species, and ecosystems' response to natural and human-induced climate changes. Despite the scepticism, Schimel remains excited about the project's incredible potential and is eager to listen to the science community to determine how best to prioritize NEON's activities. ■

Matthew Nestel

SCIENTISTS & SOCIETIES

Researchers without frontiers

Mobility is an important component for personal and career development — and is particularly useful in Europe. The Marie Curie Fellowships, set up by the European Commission, fund PhD and postdoc researchers to work in a country other than their home nation. To assist with this process, the independent Marie Curie Fellows Association (MCFA) came into existence ten years ago and is pushing for policies that would ease the movement of researchers from one country to another.

To make Europe a more attractive workplace for increasingly mobile researchers, the association needs input and support from mobile researchers, principal investigators, policy-makers, universities and industry. Part of its remit is to bring together these disparate parties and establish stronger contacts between them.

The MCFA provides feedback to European policy-makers through newsletters, by taking part in scientific, science-policy and science-related conferences and by publishing policy statements. For example, the MCFA strongly supported the 'European charter for researchers' and the code of conduct for their recruitment, two documents that were formally adopted by the

commission as a recommendation in March 2005.

The charter aims to ensure that the relationship between researchers, employers and funding organizations contributes to the generation, transfer and sharing of knowledge, and to the career development of researchers. The code of conduct aims to make selection procedures fairer and more transparent and proposes judging merit using factors apart from publication output, such as teaching, supervision, teamwork, knowledge transfer, management and public awareness activities.

The experience gained by Marie Curie fellows during their stints in different countries will help them to play an important role in building the European Research Area, an initiative to provide a European 'common market' for research and innovation. But fellows face challenges — their mobility can prove disruptive to their families, for example. To ease such difficulties and to help the fellows realize their potential within Europe, the MCFA is doing its utmost to ensure that mobile researchers will be able to enjoy the best possible working conditions. ■

Vanessa Díaz is vice-chair and Guggi Kofod is vice-secretary-general of the Marie Curie Fellows Association.

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Beginner's luck

I'm writing this entry at the end of the fourth week of my first postdoc position. It is too soon for grand claims but, despite expectations to the contrary, it seems that being a postdoc isn't that bad. In fact, I'd almost go so far as to say that I'm really enjoying myself. What's going on?

For one thing, it's liberating to know that there is no degree riding on my performance; there aren't going to be any assignments or exams standing between me and the continued receipt of my salary. Postdoc positions present their own challenges, of course, but I like to think that it is still too early to be worried about such things.

My optimism could be due to the fact that so much in my life has changed. I've changed cities, changed labs, changed supervisors and, most importantly, changed research direction. I've already stumbled across what looks to be a worthwhile project in my new field, something both intellectually stimulating and maybe, just maybe, medically useful. And there's nothing quite like the promise of a manuscript being submitted for publication in the not-too-distant future to help make research life look rosy.

And then there's the very real possibility that this period of the job is like the beginning of any new relationship — all fun and no work. Here's hoping that it stays fun for a long time to come. ■

Peter Jordan is a first-year visiting fellow at the National Institute of Diabetes