

CORRESPONDENCE

Preprints

SIR,—Although aware of the disadvantages of IEG, I am against the proposal that journals discontinue publishing papers that have been distributed via IEG.

It is of great advantage, when doing research in rapidly moving fields of science, to be informed as quickly as possible of results by other groups, and I have the impression that IEG performs this task more rapidly than most journals.

L. N. M. DUYSSENS

Biophysical Laboratory,
Leiden, Netherlands.

Preprints Galore

SIR,—The letter in the issue of October 15 under the heading "Preprints Galore", about the aims and functions of Information Exchange Groups, minimizes the importance of rapid circulation of material intended for publication and gives prominence to the establishment of priority, the fact that the documents are not refereed and to the cost of the IEG activities.

The writer himself thinks that the matter of priority is overplayed, and anyone who has considered the subject objectively must agree with him; indeed it is doubtful if the majority of writing scientists think that the risk of losing priority is one to be considered seriously. He concludes, however, by asserting that IEG is a new method of communication, and this is not the case; it has close affinities with the measures which have been advocated by Prof. J. D. Bernal for thirty years, and as a substitute for formal publication it takes us back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: it is ironic that the letter should be printed in the same issue as a paper on the Lunar Society. It is, moreover, to be recommended that anyone who considers that dissemination by IEG is an effective substitute for normal publication should study the enquiries of John Martyn of Aslib on the use of scientific and technical information and reflect on the fate of the work of Gregor Mendel.

Yours, etc.,

A. H. HOLLOWAY

8 Shrewsbury Lane,
Shooters Hill,
London, S.E.18.

SIR,—In the August 27 issue of *Nature* you discuss the concept of the Information Exchange Groups. You seem to dislike this attempt to exchange information between interested scientists in a particular area of endeavour. I have found the IEG group with which I am associated valuable. It has permitted the rapid exchange of information between working scientists in different parts of the world. The IEG articles have been of considerable value to my postgraduate and postdoctoral students. They all have access to information which would often not be available for one to one and one-half years if transmitted through the usual channels. This, I think, is of at least some benefit.

While I recognize that there are serious defects in this system, there are also serious defects in the present method of publishing articles in scientific journals. We will only learn how to develop new methods for transmitting information to each other by experimentation. I

think one should be more patient in assessing this present experiment and give it time to develop.

Yours, etc.,

J. F. MUSTARD

Faculty of Medicine,
McMaster University,
Hamilton, Ontario.

In the past few weeks seven letters in support of the practice of the Information Exchange Groups have been received in this office, and four of these have been published. There has also been one expression of dissatisfaction with IEG from a member of one of the groups. At least some of this correspondence appears to have been stimulated by the following note distributed through IEG No. 2 by Dr. Theodore H. Spaet (a letter from whom appeared in *Nature*, 212, 226; 1966):

"To Members of IEG No. 2:

"An editorial has been published in *Nature*, 211, August 27, 1966, p. 897.

"If you have found IEG No. 2 to be of value, I suggest that you make your feelings known to the Editor of *Nature*.

"The concept of IEG is at present under serious scrutiny at NIH. If it appears that the scientific community is not responding favourably, the groups will be discontinued.

"THEODORE H. SPAET,
"Chairman, IEG No. 2".

This text was generously supplied by Dr. Spaet in response to an enquiry.—Editor, *Nature*.

Rare Birds

SIR,—The International Council for Bird Preservation has recently completed a list of those birds of the world which are not only rare but also considered to be in some danger of extinction.

The list numbers some 300 species and sub-species and, together with the details of their known status, distribution, reasons for decline, etc., it is found in what is known as the Red Data Book, recently published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.

The whole purpose of this ICBP list, which is being constantly maintained and amended, is to gather together enough factual data to permit a decision on the best action to save the species.

In many cases it is now evident that immediate action is vital. Yet before the appropriate authorities can be approached, it is clearly essential to have some more precise details about status. In certain instances it would be beneficial also to have better knowledge of the birds' biology, so that sound methods of saving them can be suggested.

Zoological departments of many universities undertake vocational and other field research expeditions, and it is asked that such departments will in future be willing to carry out specific rare bird surveys.

It is asked also that other universities will consider accepting the responsibility of at least one of these field surveys, each of which should prevent an extinction.

It is hoped that departments anxious to combine useful experience with valuable purpose will seek suggestions from ICBP's Secretary at the British Museum (Natural History), London, S.W.7. Important surveys need urgent attention in almost all parts of the world, and interested universities specifying a particular country or continent may quickly obtain details of the area's rarest and most endangered species.

S. DILLON RIPLEY
President, International Council for Bird Preservation,
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington 20860, D.C.