

SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION

One Step Nearer

FIRST plans to help keep scientists and engineers in touch on a world-wide basis with the latest published work in their field have been approved at a UNESCO conference.

At a meeting in Paris earlier this month delegates from eighty-three countries and thirty-nine international organizations approved the recommendations made in October of last year to establish a World Science Information System, known as UNISIST (see *Nature*, 230, 544; 1971).

The intention behind UNISIST is that it will help overcome the "information explosion" which has resulted in about two million scientific and technical articles being published each year in 70,000 specialized journals; it will also make the work already published more easily available. UNISIST is the joint brainchild of UNESCO and the International Council of Scientific Unions, and its protagonists claim that its advantages are, first, that it is a world-wide organization that involves both governments and scientific organizations and, second, that unlike earlier plans for world-wide systems it is comparatively flexible, coordinating existing networks rather than establishing a new central organization. The chief problems that UNISIST faces are how to interconnect existing systems of information retrieval, whether conventional or computerized, and how to solve the problems of classification.

The recommendations that the conference discussed—and passed with only minor modifications—were the work of the UNESCO-ICSU committee that was created in January 1967, and final approval of the scheme now rests with the UNESCO general conference which meets in the autumn of 1972.

After the conference the chairman, Dr Harrison Brown of the United States National Academy of Sciences, said that there was "strong east-west cooperation" in the preparation for UNISIST. The French government is to establish a centre for an International Serials Data System, and Poland is providing an international training centre to help meet the shortage of information specialists. At present UNISIST is confined to science and technology, but it is hoped to extend it to cover the social sciences and humanities if the system proves successful.

A recommendation that allowance be made for UNISIST in the 1973–74 budget of UNESCO was passed to the director general, and although no figure was named, £750,000 to £1 million as recommended in October 1970, is thought to be a likely figure.

Whether UNISIST will ever function efficiently remains to be seen and doubts have been expressed as to whether UNESCO is the best body to run such an organization. The problem of accommodating the views and interests of all the countries involved is tending to produce more talk than action, and it has been suggested that intensification of the interchange of information between existing organizations might in the end prove more effective than the more ambitious UNESCO plan.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Old Boats, New Ideas

from a Correspondent

BOATS excavated in Britain and dating from before the Norman conquest were discussed at an international symposium held earlier this month at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. The Ferriby boats (1600 BC to 800 BC) are the oldest yet found in northern Europe and were described by their excavator, Mr Edward Wright, who admitted that, apart from the last of the three excavations in 1963, the rescues had been archaeological disasters. The exception, Ferriby 3, is still being treated at Hull museum.

Although the ages of the Ferriby boats are quite different, they were found within a hundred yards of each other in the Humber foreshore and have unique common structural features. They are flat-bottomed with a hinged plank structure stiffened by poles pushed through cleats. Mr Wright suggested that these boats were relics from a prehistoric boatyard that had been located at the same site for centuries.

The rescue of the Ferriby boats has proved to be a cautionary tale. This time last year another ancient boat rescue was attempted, but under very different circumstances from Mr Wright's pioneering efforts. The pre-conquest Graveney boat was raised in seventy-three parts from a Kent marsh by a joint task force from the National Maritime Museum and the British Museum, and has since been the subject of a meticulous scientific examination.

The wealth of information now emerging from this painstaking work was sketched by the archaeological director of the project, Valerie Fenwick of the British Museum. Much is being learnt about trade contacts with Europe in the ninth century AD, the importance of the sea route as a highway between London and Canterbury, the relevance of the local saltworks to the battering which the boat received and so on. Several intriguing constructional details have also been deciphered; it seems, for

example, that the boat was built right side up in the open. Such information could not have been obtained without the most exhaustive study of the boat's timbers, involving the drawing of every mark on both sides of each fragment—a nine-month task.

One question raised at the symposium was how the Greenwich unit should deploy its still slim resources (see *Nature*, 233, 226; 1971). Should it, as proposed by Mr Wright, deliberately excavate selected sites such as the sixth century BC Brigg raft still buried in a Lincolnshire brickyard or should it prepare itself for the next rescue? Ancient boats often emerge during land developments in Britain and, typically, have to be abandoned for lack of recording power and conservation facilities. Within weeks of the Graveney operation, for example, two boats of almost equal interest were found during cofferdam works in the Thames near the Mermaid Theatre. Although part of one of them was recovered, much valuable information was lost.

MUSEUMS

Keeping in Touch

HISTORY that is barely history is displayed in the Science Museum's new telecommunications gallery opened this week by Christopher Chataway, Minister for Posts and Telecommunications. The new gallery covers the development of electrical communication from the early nineteenth century to the days of colour television and a glimpse into the future is also shown.

The gallery, with an area of 10,000 square feet, provides about twice the area previously available for this collection, and is laid out on either side of a central avenue with the side bays going into particular aspects of the subject in greater detail. The north side of the gallery deals largely with line communications, the south side with radio, television and radar.

Among the more interesting exhibits are Cooke and Wheatstone's needle telegraph instruments, examples of the first transatlantic cables, and the equipment used in the Daventry test to prove the feasibility of radar in 1935, which is accompanied by a tape recording of an account of the experiment by A. F. Wilkins, who assisted Watson-Watts with the test. What is believed to be the only surviving example of the world's first centimetric radar equipment is included in the exhibition, as is the first commercially marketed video recorder.

Among the recent developments on show are a video cassette and a brief description of the possibilities of wave guides and optical fibres for carrying telecommunications signals.