

Closer links urged for islands in the sun

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The tenth anniversary of the Caribbean Academy of Sciences has highlighted both the case for greater regional collaboration on science-related issues, and the political and economic obstacles that can stand in the way.

[PORT OF SPAIN, TRINIDAD] If there was a silver lining to the clouds that raced across the Caribbean during last month's hurricane, it was perhaps that the damage the hurricane left in its wake underlined yet again the extent to which the islands of the region face common threats.

Researchers in the Caribbean are already working together to transform disaster mitigation efforts into risk management strategies. Others are exploring different forms of collaboration, from joint research on common marine problems to programmes to promote the popularization of science.

Such cooperation is being encouraged by foreign aid bodies, scientific organizations keen to provide assistance, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and political groupings, such as the Organization of American States (OAS). They see the logic of increased regional cooperation, particularly in achieving economies of scale in tackling common scientific or environmental problems.

But the message has had a rougher reception at the national level. Not only are many Caribbean states yet to be convinced that investment in science and technology should be a political priority, but historical and linguistic rivalries remain close to the surface.

Both obstacles continue to be faced by a group of scientists who, ten years ago, launched a vigorous attempt to address them head-on through the creation of a Caribbean Academy of Sciences.

At the academy's tenth anniversary meeting in Port of Spain, Trinidad, last month, its president, Wilfred Chan, professor of chemistry at the University of West Indies in Port of Spain, told how the academy already has an impressive list of achievements to its name.

Over this period, the number of elected fellows has almost doubled to just under 200, researchers have been given support to go to international conferences, a programme has been developed to boost science education in schools, and a young-scientist award has been launched jointly with the Third World Academy of Sciences.

In an attempt to overcome some of the cultural differences between the islands in the region, what began as an English-speaking organization has made a strong effort to



Wind of change: collaboration in hurricane prediction points the way for joint projects.

broaden its turf. It now has members from several French-speaking countries — its last annual general meeting was held in Guadeloupe — and the annual meeting in two years time will be held in Havana at the invitation of the Cuban government.

Partly to acknowledge these achievements, last month's meeting was attended by representatives of counterpart bodies from around the world. Each expressed eagerness to support the academy's bid to play a greater role in promoting the development of science in the Caribbean region.

Christopher Thomas, assistant secretary-general of the OAS, said the academy's objectives aligned closely with his organization's view that "a collective approach by the region will provide the optimum thrust at this most critical moment of [its] development".

He said that Caribbean nations should pool their natural and human resources "in order to convert the region from a traditionally agricultural-based economy to one that is transformed through the application of science and technology".

Several science ministers also provided support. "The need to work together is unquestionable," said Rosa Elena Simeon, Cuba's minister of science, technology and

environment. As President Fidel Castro had made clear during recent visits to Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada and the Dominican Republic, she said, her country had already expressed its "will and decision" to share its human resources and knowledge with other Caribbean states.

Trevor Sudama, minister of planning and development for Trinidad and Tobago, said the academy's role "must be strengthened". But if the spirit has been willing, the follow-through has been relatively weak.

Ramsey Saunders, professor of physics at the University of West Indies and the academy's founding president, points out that, immediately before the academy was set up in 1988, the region's ministers for science and technology had jointly promised to support it. But this promise was never kept, and the academy continues to operate through the voluntary work of its members.

The caution of individual governments is not only economic. Officials point out that there are already a number of intergovernmental mechanisms for encouraging greater scientific collaboration in the region, in particular through the Caribbean Council for Science and Technology.

Proposals to set up an independent regional research council to agree common priorities and distribute research grants on a Caribbean-wide basis have therefore been received with little political enthusiasm.

Harold Ramkissoon, a former president of the academy and now its foreign secretary, supports the idea, arguing that such a research council could help to raise the scientific performance of the region. "We have a number of research organizations in the region and there is sometimes duplication of effort," he says. "A regional research council would be able both to avoid this and to mount regional research projects."

But others are less convinced. Government officials point to problems of political accountability, while some argue that it could detract from other goals — such as promoting the public understanding of science — that can still only be addressed nationally.

There is agreement, however, that the academy is helping to develop a regional strategy whose role can only grow in importance. This message is likely to be highlighted at next year's World Science Conference, being organized in Budapest by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) — which supported the academy's anniversary celebrations — and the International Council for Scientific Unions (ICSU).

"With very limited funding, we have been able to mount a range of activities and establish links with other academics and international organizations world-wide," says Ramkissoon. "With regular funding, we could make a much greater contribution to both national and regional development." □