

Franco-Chinese collaboration

Tibetan expeditions draw breath

THE spectacular French-Chinese geological expedition to Tibet (see *Nature* 5 January pp.17-36), is unlikely to be repeated — at least for a few years. The problem is not one of politics but of resources according to the expedition's French organizer, Claude Allègre of the Institut de Physique du Globe in Paris.

The expeditions, which have revealed that the high plateau of Central Asia was created by a succession of intercontinental collisions and not just one, "have been a huge effort for both sides" says Allègre. There were three separate expeditions, in 1980, 1981 and 1982. Each involved 50 big trucks in the field, and 150-200 people. France put in some of its best geologists. Chinese resources — both people and cash — were especially stretched.

As a result, no further major French-Chinese expeditions to the area are

rectified much more cheaply. Moreover there were other plateaus in the world which were more accessible to western geologists, says McKenzie: for example eastern Turkey, the Colorado plateau, and the Alpeplano. Also, relations with China were improving to the extent that person-to-person partnerships could now be arranged, McKenzie feels, rather than vast government-backed expeditions — and in fact McKenzie is going to China on such a partnership this Easter.

Allègre says he had sought European collaboration when there were plans to continue beyond the first three years, probably with other European countries taking up the running from France. But while individual geologists had shown great interest, none was prepared to organize the collaboration with the Chinese, Allègre claims.

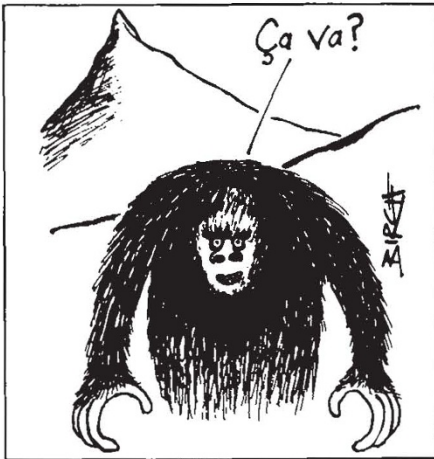
Perhaps this was wise. Allègre describes the negotiations that led up to the expeditions as "terrible", and as having been several times on the point of breaking

down. The Chinese drove a very hard bargain, which has led — for example — to the French team leaving several major instruments behind.

Allègre clearly does not relish entering such negotiations again. The result, however, was fair to both sides, he feels. Allègre says he cannot estimate the overall cost, but it had been shared equally, he claimed.

President François Mitterrand of France himself has shown real interest in the expedition, Allègre says, and by no means only in its politics. The President reveals a "greater and greater interest" in science, not only as a means to develop the French economy. Allègre, who accompanied Mitterrand on his 1983 tour of China, says that Mitterrand asked him more about plate tectonics than about science politics.

As a result, Allègre considers that while French science is not as well blessed as promised by the former research minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the budget is "protected", and will be in the future. Mitterrand has a very balanced view of the relation between basic and applied research, Allègre believes — more balanced than his ex-minister. **Robert Walgate**



planned, but Allègre believes that the Chinese will not be seeking collaboration with other partners either. Meanwhile, however — while both sides gather breath — France and China will mount small joint expeditions each year, the next to the Ping Ling mountains.

In any case, Allègre says, "we've understood what we wanted" about the region. While there is much more to learn, only a third of the results of the expeditions have been published so far and the teams need a few years just to think about the results.

Why had only France been involved in the expeditions, and not other Western countries? Partly, it may be because other geologists were less enthusiastic than Allègre about the exercise. Dan McKenzie of the University of Cambridge, for example, one of the pioneers of plate tectonics, says that while the expedition had been important and useful "I feel one ought to do simpler, cheaper things". If expensive, deep seismic studies were the object then the French-Chinese expedition would have been perfect to do the job, and would have done it well. But there was "no good gravity study" of the Tibetan plateau, for example, a lack that could be

Nature conservancy

UK unit lives hand to mouth

A REQUEST by the British Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) for extra funds to help restore the value of its research budget seems certain to be turned down by the UK Department of the Environment. NCC has asked for £200,000 towards its survey and monitoring programme, but the department has responded by suggesting that research is an area where particularly stringent savings are expected. NCC's grant from the department for next year, now under negotiation, will be announced later this month.

NCC's research programme has been steadily eroded since 1973, when the council was established as an executive body distinct from the Natural Environment Research Council. NCC research is now worth roughly half as much in real terms as in 1974. This is an untoward consequence of the Rothschild customer/contractor principle, by which some civil science research is commissioned by government departments. As, in recent years, the cost of salaries in NCC has, like that in other government departments, consistently outstripped the allowance made for it, the amount left over for research has declined. NCC also labours under an accounting peculiarity whereby it has to meet the cost of its staff pensions from its own funds.

Within a declining research budget, the amount NCC spends on research commissioned from the research councils has declined even faster. According to Sir Ronald Mason's investigation into government commissioned research, carried out for the Advisory Board for the Research

Councils (see *Nature* 306, 102; 1983), the amount spent with the Agricultural and Food Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council fell from £1.3 million to £0.3 million in the five years to 1982-83 (1983 prices). One reason for the shift seems primarily to have been cost: NCC has found it more economical to employ young researchers on short-term contracts than to hire senior scientists who would often insist on working to a higher standard than was needed. The total annual cost of all NCC research is £1.5 million.

NCC now has to satisfy itself with a very pragmatic approach. According to its chief scientist, Dr Derek Ratcliffe, any possibility of commissioning basic research has long since been abandoned, and there is no chance of turning back the clock to the days when NCC's forerunner ran an experimental station of its own. All that NCC retains is a small group which spends most of its time providing site management advice to NCC local officers, and some survey teams. Most of NCC's resources are tied up in "renotifying" owners of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs — see *Nature* 306, 525; 1983) and survey work aimed at identifying new SSSIs is a long way behind schedule.

Despite the gloomy outlook, NCC's chairman, Mr William Wilkinson, has been working hard to secure more research funds. It is felt that NCC needs hard factual information on sites to be able to make an authoritative case for their notification. **Tim Beardsley**