

Nature's East–West exchange

In the knowledge that the scientific enterprise is genuinely international and in the belief that Mr Mikhail Gorbachev's speech to the United Nations on 3 December offers us all the promise of a different world, Nature makes the following announcement to and solicitation of its readers.

WHILE on the face of things there may seem little that the scientific community can do, except to keep on working, to assist or cement the recent transformation of East–West relations, that is not strictly the case.

First, there is ample evidence that the huge Soviet research community, hampered as it is by bureaucracy and shortages of equipment, would benefit from closer relations with the outside world. Individuals might thereby be helped to be more creative. Research laboratories and institutes could well be more productive and effective if their inevitable isolation were abated even modestly. There can be few in the West who would not acknowledge that these benefits must be mutual.

It is also plain that Soviet science has much to offer, even in these competitive times, to people working in the relatively well-equipped laboratories of the West. Those benefits would also be mutual.

In the past few years, public authorities in the Soviet Union and elsewhere have recognized the urgency of these needs. Opportunities for Soviet scientists to travel to the West have been enormously increased, and at the same time liberalized. Travel in the opposite direction has similarly been enlarged. Research collaborations have multiplied, if less quickly. But it is also clear that there is a long way to go before relations between the Soviet research community and those elsewhere are as intimate and constructive as they might be.

Nature therefore intends to take two practical steps to assist these processes.

- First, we shall do more than has been possible so far to draw attention to important trends in Soviet research, largely for the benefit of readers in the West. Talks with the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, as well as with individual scientists, encourage the belief that there is much that can usefully be done.

- Second, *Nature* will create an informal network, to be known as *Nature's East–West Exchange*, whose chief objective will be to put professional researchers with mutual interests in touch with one another. *Nature* will function as a post-box only, relying primarily on information voluntarily supplied by readers, but will also use its own network of advisers to identify potential respondents to particular enquiries.

It would be rash to guess how well and how generally this arrangement can be made to work, let alone to estimate its importance in the grander scheme of things. But a scheme for exchanging information and easily transportable materials which is entirely independent of government agencies and established academies may have

the special value of enabling informal and, with luck, speedy responses to enquiries.

None of this should be taken as diminishing the importance of the bilateral exchange schemes at present operated by national academies and other agencies, or the arrangements for collaborative research involving Soviet scientists and their counterparts elsewhere. It is also a fact that in some fields, high-energy physics or plasma physics for example, Soviet collaboration with others has always been close. An informal private scheme for the exchange of information may nevertheless usefully complement arrangements already in place.

Readers wishing to participate should send in writing their names, addresses, telephone and telefax numbers to one of the editorial offices in London, Munich, Tokyo or Washington. Readers are assured that this information will not be used for any other purpose.

Readers should indicate their interest in the scheme, which may take one or more of the following forms:

- A request for information or assistance, which should be as specific as possible.
- A statement of particular information and assistance that can be conveniently provided, and which is unlikely to be readily available in the East (or West), which should also be specified as fully as possible.
- An offer to help in identifying sources of information and assistance in particular fields of research, which should also be specified with some precision. (“High-energy physics” or “molecular genetics” may invite more requests for help than respondents would wish.)

It is not intended that the scope of the exchange should be limited, but it is expected that enquiries will at the outset be requests for information, perhaps for software developed specifically for basic research, but physical samples (say, DNA probes) may also be suitable for exchange. Respondents should be aware that it is for them, not *Nature*, to comply with whatever national legislation may be in force.

Particular care will be taken to ensure that Soviet scientists at Soviet universities and less well-known research institutes will be able to collaborate.

No charges should ordinarily be made for information or materials supplied under this exchange, although there may be circumstances when two participants agree that costs arising should be paid for.

Nature will publish reports on progress of the scheme at intervals of three months.

A list of people who have endorsed the general objectives of this scheme will be published next week. □