The UK role in conservation

London

WHAT role can the UK play in world conservation efforts? That was the question addressed last week at a seminar at the Natural History Museum in London, convened by the UK Department of the Environment (DoE).

The answer: Two centuries of British interest in natural history have produced in the UK an institutionalized body of expertise and unmatched reference collections that now constitute a vital global resource. UK scientists should exploit these capabilities.

"Generations of clergymen attending to their six-legged flocks" have made the UK biota "the best-studied anywhere", said Robert M. May of the University of Oxford. But this heritage obliges the UK to foster its own systematic biology research, which has been "seriously undermined", according to Alan Hamilton of the World Wide Fund for Nature. This is currently the subject of wide-ranging reviews by the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Lords, the Natural Environment Research Council and other organizations.

Nevertheless, many UK institutions have well-established links with developing countries. The Natural History Museum, for example, is working on longterm conservation projects in Costa Rica and Belize, whereas the Overseas Development Admin-

istration, much praised for its new report "Biological Diversity and Developing Countries: Issues and Options", has contributed £40 million to the new Global Environment Facility, a \$500-million fund jointly managed by the World Bank, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Development Programme.

The fund, which is designed to provide money for a variety of environmental programmes around the world, was hailed as a "major breakthrough" by Robin Pellew of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre. Nonetheless, it does have its teething problems. Vicente Sanchez, Chilean ambassador to Kenya and permanent representative to UNEP, said one stumbling block is the mistrust in which the fund is held by many in the developing world, who regard the World Bank with suspicion. Sir Crispin Tickell, Warden of Green College, Oxford, suggested that UNEP instead should be encouraged to take the lead in selecting suitable projects to be backed by the new fund.

The DoE seminar was convened to take up the challenge posed by former UK Environment minister Chris Patten in a speech last November, but its results will feed into the ongoing global consultation process that will culminate next June in the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. DoE representatives will

use the seminar as a brief when they attend a UNEP meeting in Madrid this Monday (June 24) to put flesh on the bones of a framework convention that has already been drafted.

Further meetings are scheduled for September (in Nairobi) and January, and further consultations are certain before a workable convention emerges for signature at Rio.

The mood of the DoE meeting was one of urgency, as description followed graphic description of just how fast the world's natural genetic resources are vanishing, many of them to be lost forever no matter how hard people work to stem the tide. "We are simply committed to the disappearance of much of the world we know — that's a fact", May noted. This sobering thought has prompted serious research efforts into what Richard VaneWright, Chris Humphries and Paul Williams of the Natural History Museum have called the "agony of choice": deciding, on the basis of biodiversity measures, known systematic relationships and species richness, the areas of the world that must be given priority for saving on account of their inherent biodiversity.

Henry Gee

REMOTE SENSING

Satellite launch delay

Munich

PROBLEMS with the usually reliable Ariane 4 booster rocket have indefinitely delayed the launch of the satellite ERS-1, the first stage of the remote sensing programme of the European Space Agency.

The satellite was to have been launched on 3 May, but problems with the rocket prompted first a temporary and then a longer delay.

ERS-1 has now been removed from the top of the rocket and put into storage for at least several weeks. The earliest possible launch date is now sometime in July.

ERS-1 contains an ambitious package of remote-sensing instruments that will produce radar images of the Earth of an unprecedented scope (see *Nature* 351, 8; 1991).

The delay was caused by a pressure drop in one of the fuel lines in the upper stage of the rocket. The drop had been noticed on earlier launches, but only now has Ariane-space, the commercial launch company that provides the Ariane rocket, determined that it could lead to a catastrophic error if left uncorrected.

A spokesman for the space agency said the delay would not affect the quality of the ERS-1 observations, which can begin whenever the satellite is launched. But the delay caused much disappointment for the researchers involved, he added.

Other space agency science projects are not expected to be affected by the delay. The agency's next launch on Ariane is not due until the Infrared Space Observatory is launched in 1993.

Steven Dickman

UK SCIENCE POLICY

Tories respond to Labour plan

London

"THIN gruel" was how one UK government minister described the opposition Labour Party's science proposals that were unveiled last week (see *Nature* 351, 512; 1991). The comment, from Trade and Industry Secretary Peter Lilley, was made as he launched a Conservative Party document, 'Science and Innovation: The Cultural Revolution'.

The Labour Party intends to fund an increase in research and development (R&D) funding from 1.8 per cent to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product largely by offering tax breaks to corporate investors in R&D. In 'Science and Innovation', the government slams the Labour Party for proposing that "tax distortions and Whitehall civil servants would be better at bringing about innovation than the industrial innovators themselves". But the same document bemoans the persistent unwillingness of industrialists to invest in R&D despite 12 years of Conservative government and a plethora of schemes to encourage them to do so.

It is this lack of investment in industrial civil R&D that accounts for the decline of civilian R&D spending in the UK as a proportion of gross domestic product over the past 12 years, despite the fact that government investment in academically related

R&D is greater, as a proportion of gross domestic product, than it is in the United States and Japan (0.38 per cent, as against 0.31 per cent and 0.25 per cent respectively). The Labour Party does not question these figures — they are drawn from Table 1 of their own document, 'Pushing Back The Frontiers'.

The Labour document was cautiously welcomed by the Association of University Teachers and the pressure group Save British Science.

That group noted, however, that although Labour's intentions were "excellent", its "objectives remain largely unquantified". As for the proposal to create a science minister in the cabinet office, Save British Science continue to press for a science minister of full cabinet rank.

Speaking at Labour's press launch, Labour leader Neil Kinnock pointed out what he thought of as a telling spelling error in the Conservatives' document: it reads, "The Prime Minister already chairs a cabinet committee which overseas (*sic*) Science and Technology". Kinnock asked whether this might be a subliminal reference to the 'brain drain', the existence of which the government emphatically denies.

Henry Gee