

Research council heads to review Europe's research effort

Munich. The organization of heads of European research councils, known as Eurohorcs, is to carry out an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of European research, using international groups of experts to help to assess about ten scientific areas. The exercise aims to identify research areas which could benefit from greater collaboration in Europe and where, for example, centres of excellence might be established.

Although the Eurohorcs, at a meeting in Vienna last month, did not decide on the criteria to be used for assessing research fields, they still agreed — some feel rather optimistically — that they would aim to complete the task within six months, so as to provide information to the European Commission before the first draft of the commission's fifth Framework programme of research is completed at the end of the year. The steering committee will be headed by Eurohorcs' president, Wolfgang Frühwald from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). The European Science Foundation in Strasbourg will help to identify individuals to make up international panels of experts for each category. □

Observatory change 'risky'

Washington. Managers of the US National Optical Astronomy Observatories (NOAO) say they will have to close the 4-metre Mayall Telescope on Kitt Peak, Arizona, in addition to several smaller telescopes previously targeted for closure there and in Chile (see *Nature* 379, 569; 1996). The NOAO restructuring plan calls for building new instruments in both hemispheres, including the twin Gemini 8-metre telescopes. The Mayall would close or be privatized in 1999.

The proposal to close the Mayall — the largest telescope on Kitt

Peak — was prompted by the increasingly bleak outlook for astronomy funding at the National Science Foundation, which pays the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA) to run the NOAO. In a letter posted on the World Wide Web, AURA managers say: "The difference between level dollar funding and funding adjusted at the rate of inflation is the difference between operating and not operating the 4-m Mayall telescope."

The director of NSF, Neal Lane, in a letter of 5 April to AURA president Goetz Oertel, acknowledged that the restructuring is a "risky experiment", and that the NSF had little desire to see productive telescopes closed. But "in the present budgetary climate we have little alternative". The NOAO users' committee last week urged astronomers to write to the NSF, and warned that "a continuation of the last 10 years of declining NOAO budgets will eventually destroy the science programs of astronomers across the United States". □

Fungi species head for oblivion

London. Fungi are becoming extinct faster than scientists can study them, according to a declaration issued by 85 leading international mycologists at the British Mycological Society's centenary symposium at the University of Sheffield last month. The declaration expressed deep regret at the continued loss of habitat for fungi around the world and called for action to cut the rate of loss. Of the estimated 1.5 million species of fungi in the world, only 72,000 have been described by scientists. □

Australian academics warn of cuts

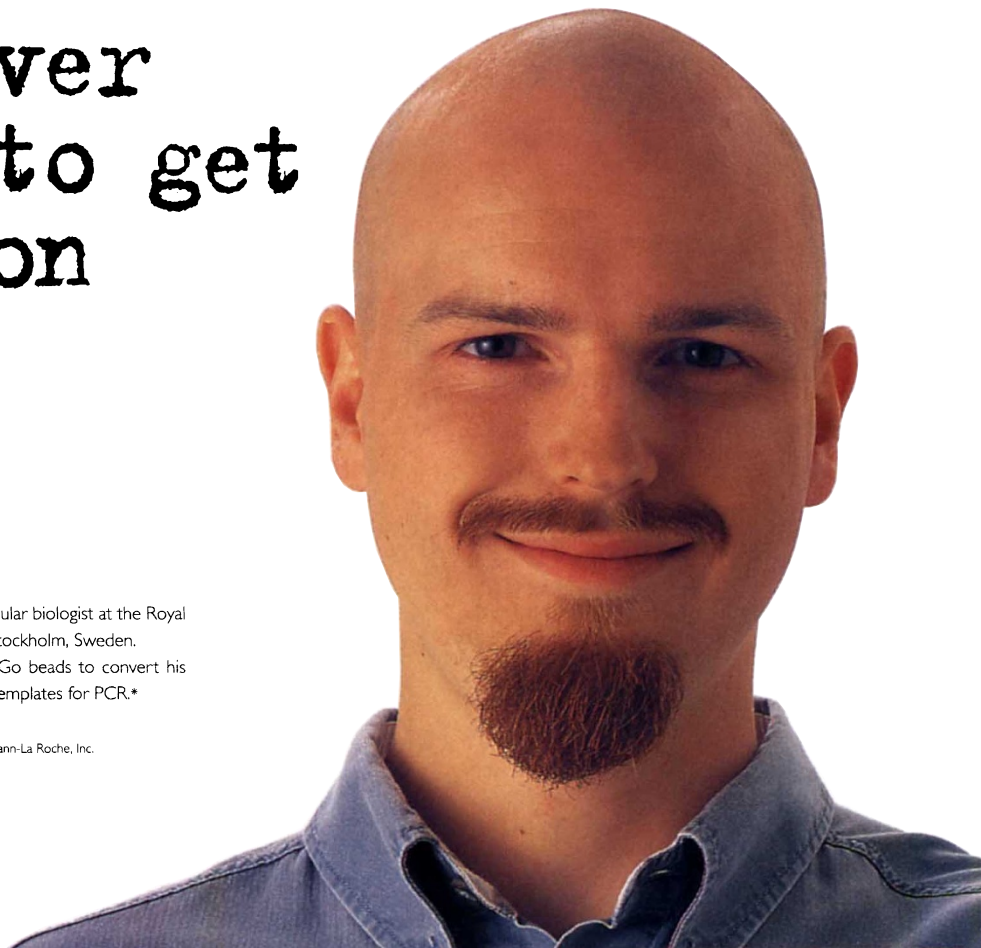
Sydney. Research leaders at Australian universities are stepping up a public campaign against threatened cuts to research funding, claiming in a statement issued last week that "the consequences for the economy would be dire if the government failed to honour its election promises". They warn that, if infrastructure for research is

Patrik never fails to get a reaction

Patrik Samuelson is a molecular biologist at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden.

Patrik uses Ready-To-Go beads to convert his RNA samples into cDNA templates for PCR.*

* PCR is a patented process of Hoffmann-La Roche, Inc.



not considerably improved, “universities could have to withdraw from Cooperative Research Centres and the industry research partnerships they represent”.

CRCs and Major National Research Facilities have been reassured by Peter McGauran, the new minister for science and technology, that their funding from Canberra is not threatened (see *Nature* **381**, 5; 1996). But the universities say that they have to contribute substantially to the running costs of such programmes, and that this contribution would be put under strain by rumoured cuts in general operating budgets of between five and ten per cent. □

Ito and Kao awarded Japan prize

Tokyo. Masao Ito, a leading Japanese neuroscientist, and Charles Kuen Kao, president of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, are this year's winners of the Japan Prize, intended as an equivalent of the Nobel prize for “applications-oriented research”. This year's winners each received ¥50 million (about US\$0.5 million) at an awards ceremony in Tokyo attended by Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko.

Ito, who is 67, heads the Frontier Research Programme at the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research (RIKEN) and is also president of the Science Council of Japan. He was awarded the prize for his explanations of the functions and mechanisms of the cerebellum. Kao won the award in this year's category of information, computer and communication systems for pioneering research on wide-band, low-loss optical fibre communications. □

Taste for caviar threatens extinction

London. More than a hundred species of marine fish, from sharks to seahorses, should be added to the global list of the world's most threatened species, according to a workshop hosted last week by the Zoological Society of London, and sponsored in addition by the World Conservation Union and the World Wide Fund for Nature.

Fifteen species of fish are considered to be “critically endangered” and face imminent extinction unless appropriate action is taken immediately, said the workshop, challenging the view that marine fishes are inherently less threatened than terrestrial animals. Among those under threat are 26 of the world's 27 sturgeon species, in demand as a source of caviar, and the great white shark, which is threatened by overfishing for its fins. Seahorses are also vulnerable because of growing demand for traditional medicines in the Far East, as well as from the aquarium trade. □

European move on Alzheimer's

Munich. The European Parliament has approved a resolution calling on the European Commission to increase support within its Biomed programme for basic research into Alzheimer's disease. The resolution also calls for a special research programme for Alzheimer's, with its own budget, and suggests the concurrent setting up of a task force to coordinate efforts to combat the disease. □

Chinese centre strikes biotech deal

Tokyo. In another sign of the growing links in science and technology between Hong Kong and mainland China, the Hong Kong Institute of Biotechnology Ltd (HKIB) has signed a memorandum of understanding with the China Innovation Centre of Life Science, under China's State Science and Technology Commission, to cooperate in the development of health care and other biotechnology-related industries.

HKIB was set up as a venture company in 1989 on the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong with financial support from the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club (see *Nature* **378**, 552; 1996). With the return of Hong Kong to China next year, HKIB, like many other research organizations in Hong Kong, is looking to forge links in research and development with the mainland. □

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