

Improbable museum seeks irrelevant items

Boston. A towel that may have been used by Albert Einstein and freeze-dried ice cream similar to that consumed by US astronauts are among the bizarre exhibits in Boston's new Museum of Improbable Research.

The museum, at Harvard University, opened earlier this month with little fanfare. "This is the best-kept secret on the Harvard campus," says Marc Abrahams, the museum's curator and editor of the affiliated journal, *Annals of Improbable Research* (AIR).

Still in its formative stages, the museum displays an odd assortment of items. Prize exhibits include remnants of moulds used to make plaster casts of the feet of Nobel prizewinning scientists, and notes taken from laboratories in which famous scientists worked.

Other exhibits include an unclaimed 1996 Ig-Nobel prize and a male pin-up 'Studmuffins of Science' calendar. There is also a reproduction of the original working papers of a scientist whose taxonomical analysis proved that a popular television figure, Barney from the *Flintstones*, is not a dinosaur after all, and a glass jar containing a Barney specimen bathed in formaldehyde.

Abrahams hopes that the collection will expand, and is encouraging people to send 'irrelevant objects' either to him or to his associates, the Harvard chemists Dudley Herschbach and William Lipscomb.

"We're looking for something different — not the kind of stuff you can see in a normal science museum, buy in a normal science museum, or steal from a normal science museum," Abrahams explains. "We specialize in the work in progress that was cut off before there was any progress." Cold fusion apparatus is one of many items on his wish-list.

IMAGE
UNAVAILABLE
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REASONS

Alice Shirrell Kaswell

Research apparatus from a failed experiment on anorexia nervosa from the museum.

"The idea is to draw attention to, or to commemorate, research efforts that are unlikely to receive funding through normal channels. We hope that, as the collection grows, some objects that eventually served as the impetus for a great scientific discovery will be donated because people laughed at them at the time."

The Museum of Improbable Research is housed on the top floor of Harvard University's Conant Laboratory in an abandoned greenhouse that looks out over the Boston skyline. The greenhouse is unique, says James Michel, a molecular biologist at the university who is also an associate curator. "Too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter, this spot has its own special thermodynamic qualities."

Others have welcomed the latest arrival on the New England museum scene. Jerry Reilly, executive director of the Boston-based Museum of Bad Art, says of his Harvard counterpart: "We wholeheartedly support the important work that they're doing. The arts and sciences have been separated for too long. We're hoping that these two facilities can help bridge the gap between the bad art and bad science worlds." Steve Nadis

Hopes rise for agreement on greenhouse gas targets

Washington. A consensus appears to be growing steadily among signatories to the international climate convention of 1992 on the need for binding targets for emissions of greenhouse gases. Although a review meeting in Geneva last week made little progress towards reaching an agreement on targets, there was little dissent from the principle that they are needed.

That encouraged diplomats, who hope to agree a treaty on such targets at a summit in Kyoto, Japan, next December. But environmental groups still accuse developed countries of foot-dragging on the issue.

The fifth meeting of the Ad-hoc Group for the Berlin Mandate, the body that is supposed to draft the treaty, was used by the leading industrial nations to put forward their various proposals for emissions limits. The United States set the tone with a conservative proposal document which said that 2010 should be the earliest date for binding limits on emissions, and suggested considerable flexibility in the way targets are set.

The United States proposes, for example, that countries that are unable to meet their immediate targets for one period should be allowed to 'borrow' part of their allowance from the succeeding period.

At a meeting of environmental ministers at the beginning of last week, the member states of the European Union (EU) failed to back a proposal to cut emissions by 5 to 10

per cent by the year 2005, and 15 to 20 per cent by 2010. As a result, at the Geneva meeting the EU could only repeat its previous support for binding targets at some date after 2000, without adding any specifics.

Japan and France — the latter breaking ranks with its EU partners — each proposed that any targets eventually agreed should be based on a maximum volume of emissions per capita. Critics described the proposal as self-serving, as both countries have lower emissions per person than other industrialized countries as a result of their heavy reliance on nuclear power.

Environmental groups had hoped that the meeting would move closer to agreement on the type of mandatory limits that could be included in a new treaty. Dan Lashof of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a Washington-based environmental group, says: "The United States is backtracking, and none of the other major players are ready to fill in for them."

But Eileen Claussen, assistant secretary at the US State Department, argues that the meeting had several positive aspects. "It's the first meeting where there hasn't been any contentious discussion about the science" of global warming, she says, adding that "everyone seemed to accept the idea of binding targets" for industrialized countries.

Claussen agrees that the US proposal to allow "borrowing" of emissions "made a lot

of people nervous", and says that "we'll have to reassess it". She says any agreement reached at Kyoto will require enabling legislation, as well as ratification by the US Senate.

The lack of a strong lead at Geneva from either Europe or Japan makes the US position crucial in the preparations for Kyoto, say observers. But US officials say that they will not decide on Washington's final position until a late stage.

Since announcing its support for mandatory targets in July (see *Nature* 382, 287; 1996), the Clinton administration has come under pressure from industrialists and Republican leaders in Congress, and is now seeking targets that would be sufficiently relaxed to allow a gradual transition. "If we negotiate something that upsets corporate America, the chances of ratification are zero," says one administration official.

The *ad hoc* group will meet three more times before the full meeting of the Conference of the Parties at Kyoto next December. Despite pressure from environmental groups, early drafts of a treaty are not expected to appear until next June.

At further meetings in Geneva this week, the subsidiary body on Scientific and Technological Advice was due to address the role of aircraft emissions and to decide what input the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change can make to preparations for the Kyoto meeting. **Colin Macilwain**