

ON THE RECORD

“Perhaps what we should do is give each person a gun, and when we see a migrating bird, we can just shoot it down.”

Hong Kong lawmaker Tommy Cheung offers an unusual proposal for controlling the spread of avian flu.

“We issued a general recommendation for poultry producers to prevent the spread of the virus with the sauna.”

Sirpa Kiviruusu from Finland’s agricultural ministry backs steam rooms as a disinfection method for controlling the bird flu virus.

Sources: AP, Agence France-Presse

SCORECARD

Deer
In Missouri, the tables have turned and this year deer are doing the shooting. Researchers have so far collected 200 hours of film from cameras mounted on the animals to give a deer’s-eye view of the world.

Wasps
Researchers in Georgia are creating a buzz with a prototype detector for explosives. The device uses wasps trained to react to certain chemicals in the air.

Pluto
As the debate about Pluto’s planetary status rages on, two extra moons spotted orbiting the body may help boost its image.

DATAPoint

Some countries benefit from a ‘brain drain’ of qualified doctors from elsewhere. In Britain, for instance, a recent study finds that 28% of physicians come from abroad. The top four suppliers are:

India	10.9%
Ireland	2.1%
Pakistan	1.9%
South Africa	1.4%

Source: *New England Journal of Medicine*

Protists push animals aside in rule revamp

Organisms whose cells have a nucleus — eukaryotes — have traditionally been separated into four ‘kingdoms’; now they have been reorganized into six. The authors of the revision hope that it will bring peace to a long-divided discipline, and raise awareness of the diversity of single-celled organisms.

Textbooks generally divide eukaryotes into plants, animals, fungi and protists. The protist kingdom mostly consists of single-celled organisms such as amoebae. Bacteria make up a fifth kingdom.

Since the late 1970s, data from electron microscopy and DNA sequences have indicated that the traditional groupings do not make sense. Protist classification was particularly troubled. But the evidence was not clear enough for a consensus on a new regime, and fierce disagreements became common.

“I’ve seen people throw things at each other,” says Sina Adl, a soil-organism specialist at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, who coordinated the group of 28 protist experts that produced the new classification. It was commissioned by the International Society of

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Trypanosomes (purple), which cause sleeping sickness, were one of the hardest protists to classify.

Protistologists and is published in *The Journal of Eukaryotic Microbiology* (S. M. Adl *et al.* *J. Eukaryot. Microbiol.* 52, 399–451; 2005).

The experts have given protists a mighty four kingdoms out of six. Animals do not even get their own group — fungi and animals have

Turkish rectors rally in support of university head thrown in jail

The struggle between Turkey’s Islamic and academic powerhouses for control of the country’s universities is becoming increasingly acrimonious.

Late last month, nearly all of the country’s 77 university rectors travelled to Van, close to Turkey’s eastern border with Iran, to support Yücel Askin, a university rector who is held in jail there. They say that the charges brought against him are trumped up, and are demanding his release.

Askin, who has been rector of the 100th Year University in Van since 1999, has been charged with corruption relating to the purchase of medical equipment for the university hospital.

According to Turkish law, all problems arising in the country’s universities should

be handled first by the Council of Higher Education. But the public prosecutor in Van ordered Askin’s arrest on 14 October without asking the council, and insisted that he is jailed until a date for the court hearing is decided.

This is the fifth case that the public prosecutor has tried to bring against Askin. The others involved accusations of illegal handling of historical documents or objects snatched from his home during police raids in the past year. All items were found to be legally registered and the charges dropped.

Askin is unpopular with religious groups, say the rectors, who argue that he has been targeted because he resisted pressure to appoint underqualified candidates,

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been merged into Opisthokonta, and plants are called Archaeplastida.

As for the protists, amoebae and slime moulds form Amoebozoa, and various single-celled organisms are now Rhizaria. The remaining two groups — Chromalveolata and Excavata — are the most contentious. “There have almost been fist fights over the mention of these groups,” says Adl. “It has taken a lot of

diplomacy to get people to sit down and talk.”

The tensions arise from conflicting DNA evidence. Some genes are different enough to suggest that the groups should be separate kingdoms, others are not. Adl’s team decided that enough evidence had accumulated to declare them distinct. “A lot of people will be upset,” he admits. “But it needed doing — over the past 20 years the classification we had has fallen apart.”

One dissenter is evolutionary biologist Blair Hedges, based at Pennsylvania State University in University Park. He says genomics work by himself and others suggests that the Excavata should not be a separate group. “People have ignored the evidence and gone on gut feeling,” he told *Nature*.

The two contentious groups include parasites that cause diseases such as malaria and sleeping sickness; Adl hopes his classification will aid drug development. “Placing these organisms in the wrong group is in part responsible for the fact that we do not have specific drugs for these diseases, because of wrong assumptions about their biochemistry,” he says.

But Michael Gaunt, who studies the Chagas’ disease parasite at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, is less convinced that the change will have dramatic practical effects. “It is important to understand the relationships between these organisms if we are to tackle these diseases,” he says. “But the lack of effective drugs is largely due to poor industrial interest.” ■

Tom Simonite

BYE OF SCIENCE/SPL

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University rectors from across Turkey head for Van to protest over the treatment of Yücel Askin.

supported by powerful Islamic figures, into key academic positions.

Turkey’s higher-education law is supposed to forbid political or religious interference in academia. But tensions

between Islamic and secular groups have come to a head since 2003, when the country’s centre-left-led coalition was replaced by the Justice and Development Party, which is mildly Islamic (see page 1).

The rectors flew to Van on 23 October to register their concern and investigate the issue. During the visit their 20-car convoy was attacked by demonstrators described by the rectors as fundamentalist Islamics.

Erdogan Tezic, president of the higher-education council, told national newspapers that Askin wanted “to maintain the secular quality of the republic”, and that “defending Mr Askin is synonymous with defending the Republic”. The Turkish Academy of Sciences has also released a statement in support of Askin.

Justice minister Cemil Cicek has told newspapers that the incident should not be turned into an ideological cause, and that the courts will decide the outcome. In the meantime, the case remains at an impasse. ■

Alison Abbott

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