

NIH urged to enforce its public-access policy

The US National Institutes of Health should require researchers to participate in its public-access policy rather than keep it voluntary, says the board of regents of the National Library of Medicine.

The policy requests all NIH-funded investigators to submit their peer-reviewed papers to the free PubMed Central database within one year of publication. In part, this is meant to help the public to access the results of federally funded research. But since the policy was implemented in May 2005, fewer than 4% of eligible articles have been added, the board reports.

Lack of awareness or technical difficulties don't seem to be the problem, as the NIH has repeatedly encouraged researchers and publishers to submit their papers. The board expressed its opinion in an 8 February letter to NIH director Elias Zerhouni.

Japan rejects Korean offer to discuss kidnap case

Japan last week rejected a North Korean proposal to have genetics experts from both countries discuss the DNA analysis of some controversial human remains.

The rejection came at the end of bilateral talks in Beijing, during which Japan failed to make progress in finding out what happened to eight citizens kidnapped during the 1970s and 1980s. North Korea says the remains at the centre of the case are those of the woman Megumi Yokota. Japan said DNA tests show the remains belong to someone else, and demanded to know Yokota's whereabouts.

Last year, Tomio Yoshii, the scientist who carried out the tests, admitted that they were not conclusive (see *Nature* 433, 445; 2005). Yoshii, a DNA expert with the Tokyo metropolitan police, has not since responded to requests for confirmation from either journalists or politicians.



Missing: the family of Megumi Yokota call for Japanese sanctions against North Korea

Plight of polar bears might force US action on climate

Prompted by lawsuits from environmental groups, the US government is considering putting polar bears on its list of threatened species. Activists hope such a listing will force the government to take action on climate change.

Most animals protected by the Endangered Species Act are declining in numbers because humans are taking over their habitats. But the main threat to the bears is thought by many to be climate change, as rising temperatures melt the Arctic sea ice under their paws.

Once a species is listed, agencies are prohibited from taking any action that would jeopardize it. Kassie Siegel, director of the climate programme at the environmental



group Center for Biological Diversity, says she takes this to mean that the US government must control emissions of heat-trapping carbon dioxide more effectively. "We believe it is a very solid legal argument," Siegel says.

On 9 February, the US Fish and Wildlife Service opened a 60-day period for public comments on whether to list the bear.

Patent office lets army alter description of weapons

The US Army is deleting what it claims was a mistaken reference to chemical and biological weapons in a patent application.

In 2003, the army was issued a patent on a grenade that it said could be packed with various payloads, including chemical and biological agents (see *Nature* 423, 789; 2003). Critics were alarmed because international treaties and federal law ban the US government from making and using biological and chemical weapons.

At the time, the army said it had no intention of making such weapons, and asked the US patent office to delete the reference to these agents from the patent. Last February, the patent office refused, but it has now relented.

Critics remain concerned. "Changing the patent doesn't change the weapon," says Edward Hammond of the Sunshine Project, an international body that works to stop the use of biological weapons.

US fails to make the grade on tackling ocean issues

The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative has given the United States a D+ on its efforts to combat problems facing the oceans, such as pollution and overfishing.

Suggestions from the US Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission prompted the Bush administration in 2004 to release an ocean action plan. The new report card suggests that little progress has been made in six areas from fisheries management to funding and education.

A White House spokeswoman, Michele St Martin, says that she expects higher marks

when future projects, such as reauthorizing a national fisheries conservation act, get under way.

Methane deposits not to blame for sudden warming

New data from a Greenland ice core have dealt what could be a blow to the idea that methane escaping from the seabed can drive rapid climate changes.

Methane, a strong greenhouse gas, is buried in some sea-floor sediments in a crystal called methane clathrate. A release of trillions of tonnes of methane from clathrates, for example, is thought to have triggered a temperature jump some 55 million years ago at the Palaeocene/Eocene boundary. Other rapid warming events have also been attributed to methane releases.

Now Todd Sowers, an Earth scientist at Pennsylvania State University, has measured the hydrogen isotopes of atmospheric methane from three warming episodes, 38,000, 14,500 and 11,500 years ago. Methane from clathrates contains more of the heavy form of hydrogen than methane from land-based sources. Sowers found no evidence for increased amounts of methane from clathrates in these periods (T. Sowers *Science* 311, 838–840; 2006).

"This means that seafloor methane reservoirs must have been stable at these times, or at least that no significant amounts of methane escaped the ocean," Sowers says.

Correction

In our story "Cloudshine is a stellar snap for Harvard duo" (*Nature* 439, 250; 2006), we incorrectly presented an image from the cited paper as the first picture of cloudshine. Similar images have been taken in the past at optical and other wavelengths.