



Sea of change: the *Sorcerer II* is obtaining DNA samples from oceans around the world.

sequences. Still, although the hard numbers might be toned down in the future, Orellana and Palenik don't question that the Global Ocean Sampling database contains a wealth of new proteins.

Already, researchers are tracing the course of protein evolution using the database. Others will search it for new enzymes that might have technological applications, or use it to learn more about microbial ecology. For instance, Jonathan Eisen, a study co-author and microbiologist at the University of California, Davis, will work to match gene fragments in the database with their host organism, a substantial technical challenge when dealing with unfamiliar microbes.

Such studies need to be followed by experiments to establish the function that the gene sequence actually has in the organism, warns Eugene Madsen, a microbiologist at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. "You can over-interpret DNA sequence data," he says, "but if you're careful, you just use them as a clue and then they either lead to solving the mystery or they don't."

Dennis Hansell, a microbiologist at the University of Miami in Florida, adds that although his research won't entail direct analysis of the Global Ocean Sampling sequence data, the newfound wealth of microbial diversity has made him re-evaluate his picture of how microbes leave their chemical fingerprints in the ocean. He likens the collection of genomic sequences to characterizing all of the pigments an artist could use to paint a portrait. "It's blending the pigments and applying them that results in a Mona Lisa," Hansell says. "I'm looking at the Mona Lisa in my data, and this shows me what the pigments are." ■

Heidi Ledford
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But Zerhouni said that the agency had to make tough choices to maintain support for bench scientists and, in particular, young investigators. "Clearly, unless there were additional resources, it wouldn't have been wise to sacrifice the next generation [of scientists] for this study," he said.

Obey, who is chair of the House Committee on Appropriations, said that he would solve that problem in 2008 by restoring money for the children's study. "We are going to put that money back next year too," he says. "And it will not squeeze other research because we will expand the institutes' budget, just as we did this year." In February, Obey and his Senate counterparts

added an extra \$620 million to the NIH's budget for 2007 (see *Nature* 445, 572-573; 2007), including \$58 million to fund the children's study. Early this

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month, study administrators asked contractors to pitch proposals for managing up to 30 of the 105 sites. For 2008, they are hoping for another \$111 million.

Duane Alexander, director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human

Development in Bethesda, Maryland, said that Obey's vow to deliver funding came as "a welcome surprise". The study sets out to answer big questions, Alexander says. "If there were a cheaper, smaller, faster way to answer them, you would do it. But there isn't. And as we get answers about environmental factors, it's going to pay for itself many, many, many times over."

Over 25 years the study is expected to grow up to join the ranks of massive population studies, such as the Framingham Heart Study, that have yielded troves of information on disease causes and associations. If, that is, it doesn't die in its infancy. ■
Meredith Wadman

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CHINA DAILY/REUTERS

ZOO NEWS

Vets at an animal research centre in China's Shaanxi province have called for their panda Niu Niu, who lost two-thirds of a leg in a fight last year, to be fitted with a fake limb to allow her to mate without toppling over.

OVERHYPED

Is nothing safe from the perils of global warming? Apparently, the latest victim is the sex trade in Bulgaria, where brothel owners are claiming that their best girls have headed for the hills to entertain snowless skiers.

SCORECARD

▲ Pluto
New Mexico has declared that the beleaguered rock should be re-declared as a planet...at least while in the skies over New Mexico.

▼ Space return flights
Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, has marked her 70th birthday by declaring herself ready to fly to Mars "without coming back".

ROBOT NEWS

South Korea is doing its bit to prevent future dystopia by drawing up a Robot Ethics Charter, one of the key points of which is that humans should maintain control over our electronic counterparts.

Sources: Reuters, Metro, FPSpace, BBC

SIDELINES