

SELECT COMMITTEE

More Questions for NERC

THE subcommittee of the Select Committee on Science and Technology last week continued its inquiries into the running of the Natural Environment Research Council, this time with three witnesses from headquarters. By all appearances, the officials of the council are satisfied with their relations with the Government and with the type of work they are sponsoring, but they are anxious to speed up publication of their plans for the future.

Professor V. C. Wynne-Edwards, chairman of NERC, thought that the Nature Conservancy can only have benefited from its absorption into NERC when the council was set up. He said that the growth rate of the conservancy has been as great since the takeover as before, which must be good. But the Nature Conservancy now has to report to NERC, and in day to day policy making cannot be completely independent. He did not think that there is any friction between the conservancy and NERC, and it is an advantage for a very small organization to have become part of a much larger one with, if necessary, a louder voice.

Professor Wynne-Edwards was satisfied that NERC is right to devote 32 per cent of its annual expenditure to the sciences of the solid Earth. He said that the council recognized at an early stage that it was in the national interest to give much more attention to the shallow seas and continental shelf. The council tries hard to identify studies which show promise of economic and social benefit and which deserve special attention. The problem of sharing out NERC's resources is much greater than that of obtaining sufficient funds. Mr R. J. H. Beverton, secretary of the council, said that he finds relations with the Council for Scientific Policy, which advises on the allocation of money to NERC, most helpful and fruitful. Only once has the CSP requested NERC to change its proposals, when a year ago it gave advice on the reshaping of plans for the continental shelf.

On the question of transferring to the Ministry of Technology, Mr Beverton thought that there would be

no advantage in being responsible to this ministry rather than to the Department of Education and Science. NERC is concerned with all kinds of research from basic to applied, and the DES has no pressures to apply as other ministries closely concerned with industry might have—the Ministry of Technology, for example. Mr D. J. Maclean, deputy secretary of NERC, pointed out that it is necessary to maintain close relations with the chief Government departments.

Eventually there should be a spate of reports about the future of the environmental sciences. Mr Maclean said that NERC is trying to develop master plans of a strategy for research in each of the chief disciplines dealt with, based chiefly on economic and practical needs. The master plans are now well advanced for hydrology, forestry and work in the Antarctic. The plan for geophysics and geology will take a little longer, but Mr Beverton explained that at a recent meeting professors of geology were asked to help with such a plan and gave a very enthusiastic response.

There should also be a report on the biochemistry of marine organisms, with plans for the future, similar to the recent reports on enzymes and polymers produced by the Science Research Council. Mr Beverton also explained that the first outline of NERC's marine science strategy was ready some time ago and was transmitted to the recent Government report on marine science and technology. In the context of this report NERC will now publish its own plan. The progress with most of these plans is, however, not as fast as it might be, because of the difficulty of finding people with both the expertise and time to sit down and write them. He agreed that, when ready, the plans should be made public, because there is a need to attract more scientists, particularly physicists, to apply for grants from NERC.

Professor Wynne-Edwards said that he was not disappointed by the response of the universities to NERC, but there is a need to show students what new developments are important, rather than what was important ten years ago. The forthcoming master plans are to be the beginning of this sort of communication with the universities, but they will not be the only means of communication.

disposed of any of the properties in Bloomsbury that had been acquired for a site for a new British Museum Library. The Government is awaiting the report of the Dainton Committee before doing anything. (Written answers, April 21, 22.)

Murders in Scotland

MR N. BUCHAN said that the number of murders made known to the Scottish police in 1968 was 41—242 per cent more than in 1957. Over the same period, crimes of violence increased by 221 per cent from 1,116 to 3,586. There have been eight recruits to the Scottish police forces so far this year. (Oral answer, April 23.)

Computer-aided Design

SINCE its formation in July 1967, the committee on computer-aided design has made ten recommendations which involve possible contract action by the Ministry of Technology. Dr J. Bray, for the ministry, said two contracts have been placed, two are being approved and five did not attract the support of the industries concerned. (Written answer, April 21.)

AEA Research

THE AEA accounts for 1968–69 are not yet available, but Mr J. P. W. Mallalieu, for the Ministry of Technology, said that the net cost of civil research and development was about £58 million. Net cash costs amount to nearly £30 million. Of the £28 million balance, £2 million was spent on international projects, £18 million on interest and depreciation and £8 million was spent at sites other than the authority's civil research and development establishments. (Written answer, April 21.)

Male Contraceptive Pill

IN the House of Lords, Baroness Serota, for the Department of Health and Social Security, told Lord Arran that the Government does not feel justified in spending public money on research on contraceptive pills for men. Baroness Summerskill added that she believes it is not in the interests of families to expose both man and wife to "that dangerous medicament known as the pill". (Oral answer, April 23.)