

## IN BRIEF

**Geothermal energy**

Geothermal energy in the United Kingdom is not likely ever to be a major resource. This was the unsurprising conclusion to be drawn from evidence recently given to the Energy Sub-Committee of the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology by Dr Bill Bullerwell, Deputy Director of the Institute of Geological Sciences. Even the few prospects worth pursuing, particularly in Cornwall and the West Hampshire Basin, did not warrant more than a proposed £800,000 research programme over the next three years. In the longer run Dr Bullerwell thought there were possibilities in disused North

Sea wells, where temperatures up to 160 °C have been recorded; water might be circulated and the heat converted to hydrogen storage.

**UK energy policy**

The UK Department of Energy is aiming for a bigger Government say in shaping the country's future energy policy. The changes it proposes come in a 20-page report circulating among Government and trades union officials which was prepared by the political advisers to the Energy Secretary, Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn. The report follows his call last week for a new approach to long-term planning, and

suggests the introduction of new administrative set-ups within the nationalised fuel industries.

**Telecommunications research**

The UK telecommunications industry entered the telephone centenary week with a sharp reminder of its "competitive weaknesses". The Labour Research Department, an independent, union-backed organisation, has suggested that the fault lies in the comparatively low levels of telecommunications research spending in Britain, and sees one possible remedy in the extension of state control to the private supply industries.

MAN has modified the natural landscape in all parts of the world, to make it more productive and to support a larger human population. He has felled the forests which originally covered most temperate areas, and he has drained marshes and fens to produce fertile farmland. In the past these activities were almost universally applauded. In the seventeenth century the Dutch engineer Vermuyden introduced scientific land drainage to East Anglia; he was hailed as a benefactor for turning the almost unproductive wasteland into some of the best arable in England. Others who extended his work, including the drainage of Whittlesea Mere, the largest lake in Southern England, were seldom criticised for their actions. Almost everyone thought that agricultural improvement should be encouraged.

The only objectors to drainage were the few "fen tigers", poor peasants who made their living catching eels and wildfowl, and cutting reed for thatch. Today, when most of Europe's marshes have been drained, and development is destroying (or improving) wetlands throughout the world, the ecological importance of such areas is being increasingly realised. We have the international "Convention on Wetlands of International Importance", and this year, 1976, the Council of Europe is sponsoring a European Wetlands Campaign. The intention is to try to preserve as many as possible of the remaining and unpolluted rivers, estuaries, lakes, ponds, marshes, bogs and fens as habitats for wildlife, particularly for waterfowl.

Agriculture is perhaps no longer the main cause of wetland destruction, though the unwise use of pesticides on crops near to rivers and marshes has taken its toll of fish and fish-eating birds. Industrial pollution has also had its effect on all forms of

wildlife. Marshes near to human settlements, particularly in the tropics, are blamed for breeding mosquitoes which transmit malaria and other diseases, and may be saturated with DDT and other chemicals. Uncontrolled shooting has affected bird populations, and obtrusive sports like water skiing and speedboat racing have turned peaceful lakes into noisy infernos.

**Saving the wetlands**

**KENNETH MELLANBY**

It would be absurd to pretend that the majority of the population of any developed country cared greatly for wetlands and their flora and fauna, and public concern in developing countries must be minimal. So the conservationists must be congratulated in obtaining such widespread international support, from scientists and politicians, for their preservation. However, though many of our governments pay lip service to this type of conservation, their actions have been incredibly dilatory and have not always accorded with their public protestations.

Although there have been inter-

national discussions on wetland and waterfowl conservation for decades, it was only in February 1971 that the text for a convention was formulated at Ramsar in Iran. It was then agreed that when seven different countries had ratified this convention, it would come into force. Bureaucracy has delayed this ratification for five years, during which period many valuable wetlands which might have been saved have been lost.

This delay has been particularly discouraging for the British ornithologists and conservationists who played a leading part in the whole campaign. They hoped that Britain would set an example by rapid action, so leading the world officially as well as scientifically. This was not to be. The convention was first ratified by Australia, then by Iran, Finland, Norway, Sweden and South Africa. This was the state of play in March 1975. One more signature was needed—surely this would be that of Britain. At a meeting in Germany months earlier the Foreign Office had assured our delegation that ratification was "imminent". However, Greece acceded in August 1975, bringing the convention into force. Bulgaria signed next, Britain came in ninth. Now Britain is used to seeing its representatives coming in far down the line at the Olympic Games, so perhaps we should not have been surprised to find our diplomats are as slow as our athletes.

However, let us be thankful for small mercies, in that, at long last, the Foreign Office has given its support to the efforts of our scientists. No doubt the official responsible will be suitably rewarded. As he has been concerned with fens and bogs, the most appropriate honour would be the prestigious Royal Victorian Chain; this rarer decoration would clearly be more suitable than the commoner Order of the Bath.