

Mount Graham telescope brings further partners into sight

Washington. Ohio State University is planning to rejoin the Large Binocular Telescope (LBT) project on Mount Graham in Arizona, which it left in 1991 after protests against the environmental impact of the project.

The university is planning a \$6.4-million contribution to LBT, buying it a one-eighth share in the project. The much-delayed facility is now under construction near the summit of Mount Graham, and a statement from Ohio State said that the environmental and land-use issues surrounding the project "have been satisfactorily resolved".

Existing partners at the LBT — the University of Arizona, the Research Corporation, and an Italian consortium — have enough money to equip the telescope with only one mirror. But if negotiations with Ohio State University and a German consortium are successfully completed, the two-mirror project will be fully financed. It could be in use in 2001, the statement said. □

Denver can upgrade observatory

Washington. After a year-long environmental assessment, the United States Forest Service has issued a decision notice and special use permit allowing the University of Denver to upgrade its facilities at Mount Evans Observatory near Georgetown, Colorado. This permission includes provision to add a 4-metre-class telescope to the observatory's existing facilities, about 4,000 metres above sea level. The university has issued a call for prospective academic and financial partners for the project. □

Apology for accused dean

London. The rector of a Canadian university that wrongfully forced out one of its senior staff following allegations of financial misconduct has publicly expressed regret at the pain and loss of reputation suffered by the researcher, M. N. S. Swamy, and his family. Frederick Lowy, rector of Concordia University, Montreal, has acknowledged the university's mistake and confirmed that "there is no evidence of mismanagement or misuse of any other funds under Dr Swamy's control".

In 1994, Swamy, then dean of engineering and computer science, and two other researchers had their research grants frozen following allegations of financial irregularities. Swamy was asked to retire early along with one other colleague. The third researcher was asked to resign. The allegations were later found to be without foundation. But the university, despite clearing the three of any misconduct, was unable to offer them faculty positions (see *Nature* **381**, 104; 1996). Swamy, however, has now been nominated for the position of professor emeritus. □

French chemical charges

Paris. A French historian last week alleged that a French chemical company, Ugine, may have produced Zyklon B, the gas that was used in the Nazi gas chambers of the second world war. The claims were made by Annie Lacroix-Riz, professor of modern history at the University of Toulouse, and a member of the French communist party. In support of her claims, Lacroix-Riz cites the creation in 1941 of a Franco-German company — Duferrit-Sofumi — by Ugine and Degesh, a company which was itself partly owned by I. G. Farben, the chemical group that produced Zyklon B. □

Biomedical institute expands

Boston. A new wing has been dedicated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research. The \$35-million expansion, which was completed after a four-year construction effort, adds 20 new laboratories, increasing by

more than 45 per cent the amount of space available for research and training at the institute, which is playing a key role in the Human Genome Project.

The new wing will enable the institute to expand its biologic containment facilities for infectious disease research, double the size of its facilities for studying mouse models of human disease, and create a new Center for Structural Biology that will promote the field of molecular medicine. The Whitehead Fellows Program will also grow as a result of the research space opened up by the new wing. "The new facilities will ensure that our young researchers continue to have the tools and resources they need to pursue novel ideas," says Gerald Fink, director of the Whitehead Institute. □

Award for promoting science

London. Sweden's Right Livelihood Foundation has honoured an Indian organization that has adopted a pioneering approach to public understanding of science in the southern state of Kerala. The three recipients of the 1996 Right Livelihood Award — sometimes described as the 'alternative Nobel prize' — include the Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishat (KSSP), the people's science movement of Kerala.

The KSSP communicates science by simultaneously emphasizing its impact on society. KSSP now has 60,000 members, including 10,000 teachers. It is widely considered to have contributed to Kerala's high levels of adult literacy — 91 per cent — and life expectancy — 71 years — compared with the Indian average of 52 per cent and 60 years respectively. □

Biologist for US agency

Washington. The former second-in-command at the short-lived National Biological Service (NBS) has been tipped to become the first chief biologist of the reorganized US Geological Survey (USGS) in Reston, Virginia. Dennis B. Fenn, a soil scientist who recently served as the NBS deputy director, will head the new Biological Resources Division at USGS (see *Nature* **382**, 658; 1996). The survey's fourth and newest division was formed from the remains of the NBS, which Congress abolished as an independent agency last year. Before joining the NBS, Fenn was chief scientist at the National Park Service. □

Astronomer backs 'ET research'

Paris. Sir Martin Rees, Britain's Astronomer Royal, last week said he supported a "modest" programme to search for intelligent extraterrestrial life. Rees was speaking after delivering a lecture on cosmology at the British Embassy in Paris, organized by the British Council as part of France's science festival, *Science en fête*.

Although radioastronomers felt searches for extraterrestrial life "diverted their time", Rees argued that public interest in the area was "enormous". Rees himself declared that he had "an open mind" as to existence of life on other planets. Meanwhile, the Royal Greenwich Observatory this week called for an international effort to study the threat that other sorts of extraterrestrial bodies, such as asteroids and comets, might collide with the Earth. □

Population growth decelerates

London. Global population growth appears to have slowed down, but the steep rise in the numbers of elderly people will continue, according to new forecasts from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), a private research organization based in Laxenburg, Austria.

Estimates presented at the United Nations population conference in Cairo two years ago projected a doubling of world population to 12 billion within the next century. But the IIASA analysis, published earlier this month, says that the continuing decline in fertility strongly indicates that this 12-billion figure will not be reached. □