

Conservationists condemn changes to protection act

The US House of Representatives has approved a major overhaul of the Endangered Species Act, the 1973 environmental law that protects plants and animals threatened with extinction.

The bill, which passed on 29 September, includes such sweeping changes as paying property owners who cannot develop their land because it is home to an endangered species. It would end the designation of specially protected 'critical habitat' for endangered species, and would considerably toughen the requirements for data taken into account when making decisions about a species' fate.

Under the proposal, all data must be approved by the Secretary of the Interior, a move that critics say will ill-advisedly put decisions of scientific value into the hands of a political appointee. Environmental groups are bemoaning the bill's passage. Representative Richard Pombo (Republican, California), who introduced it, says the changes will improve the scientific basis for decision-making and refocus the act on recovering endangered species.

The bill will not become law unless the

IMAGE
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REASONS

Proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act may affect animals such as the black-footed ferret.

Senate passes a similar bill, which is not expected in the near future. Senators led by Lincoln Chafee (Republican, Rhode Island) are working on less radical reforms to the act.

Head of drugs watchdog drops some cancer duties

Just days after being appointed interim chief of the US Food and Drug Administration, Andrew von Eschenbach has temporarily given up his day-to-day duties as director of the National Cancer Institute. He has also excused himself from many matters

involving cancer drugs that might come before the agency (see page 789).

The dual appointment of von Eschenbach had come under fire from ethicists. They said that one person could not effectively run two multibillion-dollar federal agencies, and that he faced conflict-of-interest problems (see *Nature* 437, 606; 2005).

Germany's prodigal sons tell it to buck up funding

Young German scientists working in the United States have sent an open letter to their research ministry asking it to improve conditions at home. Among other things, they demand more money for research, more transparency in recruitment processes, and a tenure-track system for young scientists, as is common in the United States.

Drafted by the German Scholars Organization, the letter argues that young scientists do not want to return to Germany because of the obstacles there to conducting research. "We need reforms," says Michael Koeris, one of the letter's authors and a biologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

The 11 researchers who drafted the letter are supported by more than 350 colleagues

— almost all German scientists working in the United States, including Nobel laureates Wolfgang Ketterle and Herbert Kroemer.

Japan's fast-breeder reactor gets green light

Japan should aim to commercialize its prototype fast-breeder nuclear reactor by 2050, says a panel convened by the

country's Atomic Energy Commission.

The Monju reactor in Tsuruga, central Japan, has been shut down since 1995, when it began leaking liquid sodium just a few months after it started to operate. Japan plans to restart the fast-breeder reactor, which produces more fissile material than it consumes, in 2008.

Officials in Japan's cabinet office argue that the reactor is now safe, and that the target date will motivate researchers to

accelerate research and development. Many of the country's nuclear power plants will need to be replaced by 2050, and the Monju reactor, which it is hoped will be more cost-effective, could help to make replacements more affordable, the atomic-energy panel reported on 29 September.

Meanwhile, France's Atomic Energy Commission has reaffirmed that it is interested in jointly using the Monju reactor, according to a Japanese government official.

Cassini gets close to Saturn's battered satellite

It looks like the strangest moon in the Solar System. When the Cassini probe passed just 500 kilometres above Saturn's satellite Hyperion on 26 September, it revealed a landscape covered in deep craters with sharp rims (see picture).

"The surface looks weird," says Tilmann Denk, a planetary scientist at the Free University in Berlin. "It looks so different from anything we've seen before, like a sponge you would use in your bathtub."

Hyperion has an unusual elongated shape, being 360 kilometres long but just 250 kilometres wide, and it tumbles around Saturn chaotically. Because other objects of a similar size are much more spherical, astronomers think that Hyperion may be a fragment of a larger object that was smashed apart by a collision.



Correction

Magnets and equipment supplied by Oxford Instruments, as described in "Fatal attraction" (*Nature* **436**, 624–625; 2005), are used for nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy not magnetic resonance imaging, as stated in the article. The world's first superconducting magnet was also made three years after the company's foundation, not beforehand.

Clarification

In our News story on using fMRI lie detection to uncover criminals (*Nature* **437**, 457; 2005), we stated that Daniel Langleben and his colleagues could detect lies from truth with 99% accuracy. We wish to clarify that this was the accuracy for individual tests — the more likely average success rate for practical purposes is about 88%.