Industry: policing the 'dark side' of ecology

SIR — I commend your News Feature "Caught between shores" (*Nature* **440,** 144–145; 2006), highlighting the rift between academic and corporate ecology. I fully support your call for a higher standard of ecological science to regulate business activities and defend the environment. However, considering that environmental issues are gaining global and political centre stage, and with a growing awareness of the need to preserve natural heritage, I feel you stopped short of speaking out on the truly crucial issues at hand.

There has been considerable movement at governmental level during the past few decades to implement a host of environment-protection legislations. These are designed to force businesses to consider the ecological implications of their actions within a legal framework, usually through an environmental impact assessment (EIA).

But there has been insufficient back-up or policing of these policies. The major blunder is that the responsibility for organizing the ecological studies required for an EIA is left to the very companies who are supposedly being regulated. It may well be that the science performed within such companies is sound and impartial. But without an official system to regulate the EIA process, is it really surprising to see hostile attitudes among ecologists in academia towards colleagues perceived as going to the 'dark side'?

Perhaps a United Nations-sanctioned professional body should be created to govern scientists involved in EIA preparation. The Ecological Society of America runs a professional certification scheme that would be a useful model for such an action. Or perhaps EIAs should, by law, be outsourced to 'regulated' ecological consultancies.

If big businesses have a genuine ethical policy, they will support such actions. If they don't, the wheat will be sorted from the chaff.

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Industry: speak up to stop its pressure on academia

SIR — Your News Feature "Caught between shores" (*Nature* **440,** 144–145; 2006) suggests that scientists in industry sacrifice independence for influence. So do scientists in government. It's a classic insider/outsider dilemma. As a former chief environmental scientist for Australian Mineral Development Laboratories, I've tried both sides. But companies and governments make no claim to put truth before profit or politics. Universities do.

A more severe and insidious threat to scientific integrity is when governments link research funding to industry involvement, or when universities hire people with a background in commercial cut-and-thrust rather than academic ethical practice.

What to do? As a scientist, you can keep your independence if you are cautious with unsolicited commercial contacts and careful with contracts, and if you have no dependents, so you can ignore threats — whether financial, legal or worse. You can keep your reputation if you publish in good journals, maintain competitive research funding as well as industry contracts, work (for free if need be) for community watchdogs on the industry concerned, and take part in public debate and expert advisory councils. Just don't expect much spare time, or influence.

At a societal level, academic independence would be served by better separation between sectors: industry for entrepreneurship, government to regulate, universities for knowledge. This would work best with a fourth entity to develop and apply university research for industry and government and to insulate academics from commercial and political pressure. Some government research organizations used to do just that, but now their roles, too, have become blurred.

Currently, peer support is our best hope. Scientific and professional societies have a critical role. If your colleagues are being pressured improperly, help them. Your turn won't be far away.

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Risks of a high-protein diet outweigh the benefits

SIR — Alastair Robertson of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) says that the CSIRO's high-protein Total Wellbeing diet is "based on peer-reviewed science within robust experimental frameworks" ("Diet's healthy blend of science and practicality" *Nature* **439**, 912; 2006). These small studies reported no significant difference in weight loss between a high-protein meat-based diet and a control diet with lower protein content. The exception was a small sub-group of women with high triglyceride levels, who lost more weight over 12 weeks with a high-protein diet.

Longer-term trials of high-protein diets are more controversial, but some studies by the CSIRO and others show that such results do not last, and that weight loss and sustainability are not superior to diets that focus on a reduction in fat and overall energy intake (see G. D. Brinkworth *et al. Int. J. Obes.* **28**, 661–670; 2004). Robertson's claim that the Total Wellbeing diet can "contribute to reducing obesity in Australia" is hype, not science. The diet is not a more viable option than current dietary recommendations.

Recent cohort and laboratory studies (T. Norat *et al. J. Natl Cancer Inst.* **97,** 906–916; 2005, and M. H. Lewin *et al. Cancer Res.* **66,** 1859–1865; 2006) also highlight the potential increased risk of colorectal cancer with a high intake of red and processed meat — both prominent in the CSIRO diet. Add the high financial and ecological costs of diets high in meat, and they are not justified in the absence of any superior weight-loss benefit.

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Local people may be the best allies in conservation

SIR — We, like many, have been excited by the discovery of new animal and plant species in West Papua's Foja Mountains. Although we are not against granting the area official protection status, as discussed in your News story "Calls to conserve biodiversity hotspots" (*Nature* **439**, 774; 2006), we warn against imposing such schemes on local people.

Protection status in itself is no panacea: elsewhere in Indonesia deforestation inside protected areas often outpaces that outside (see L. M. Curran *et al. Science* **303**, 1000–1003; 2004). But there is considerable scope for arrangements that respect local claims and interests while also benefiting conservation goals. Working with Indonesian partners and Conservation International in the Mamberamo-Foja region, we have found that locals are valuable allies for conservation. Indeed, they have been solely responsible for protecting the Foja until now, and it was the local people who made the recent Foja expedition possible. They are sensitive about these ancestral lands, and have driven off outsiders seeking minerals and other resources in the past. But, once a firm basis for trust has been established, they provide enormous input, creating maps of special sites and resources with their traditional knowledge.

Local communities must not be viewed as a problem, but as central to the solution.

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