

The Ecologist

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Campaigns & News

Free Speech Under Attack in US

Talk show celebrity Oprah Winfrey was dragged into court this month over allegations that her show suggested that BSE ("Mad Cow" disease) could appear in US cows thanks to beef industry practices.

In a programme broadcast on April 16, 1996, a guest on the show – Howard Lyman of the Humane Society of the United States – warned that the practice of grinding up dead cows to use as cattle feed, common in the beef industry (though since banned), was likely to have led to the emergence of Mad Cow disease in British herds. After hearing Lyman's graphic description of BSE and its roots in industrial factory-farming, Winfrey declared: "It has just stopped me cold from eating another burger." Share prices for beef subsequently plummeted on Wall Street and remained depressed for two months.

While large industries have no qualms about using mass media to advance their own agenda, the rare dissenting voice sets

off alarm bells in the corridors of power. Citing a Texas statute which allows lawsuits to be filed against individuals who publicly criticize the way foods have been grown, transported, processed, distributed or sold, a group of wealthy cattle ranchers sued Howard Lyman, Oprah Winfrey, and her show's producers for \$6.7 million. The ranchers are led by Paul Engler, president of Cactus Feeders Inc. The Amarillo, Texas cattleman is the largest cattle feeder in the nation, and has an extensive background in corporate agribusiness.

The so-called "food disparagement" laws which are being used against Lyman and Winfrey have been passed by 13 states, and are being considered in nine more. This will be the first time such a statute has ever been tested in court.

Critics point out that the laws weaken the ability of consumer groups, farmworkers, scientists and the media to publicly express concerns over food safety,

and could stifle debate on public health issues. There are also fundamental concerns over free speech and constitutional rights. "These laws are a disaster for anyone who wants to exercise free speech rights regarding food safety issues," said John Stauber of the Center for Media and Democracy. Sandra Baron, executive director of the Libel Defence Resource Center, agrees. "Most of the (food disparagement) bills have been written in such a way that they undermine basic elements of the old common law and libel law. I don't think they'll withstand constitutional scrutiny."

If the plaintiffs are successful in their suit against the show, the outcome may also have wider, more disturbing implications. "If the food industry can change libel laws, why not the chemical industry?", muses Stauber. "Why not the auto industry?" Would "landmine disparagement" laws be next?

The Cost of Objectivity

A recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* looking into the influence of corporate funding on scientific and medical opinions revealed a disturbing, if unsurprising, fact: the views of the specialists were likely to be heavily influenced by the source of their funding. Canadian researchers examined the opinions of 86 medical experts who had all written on the use of calcium-channel-blockers – somewhat controversial drugs used to treat patients suffering from high blood pressure and heart disease. The study found that of those coming out in favour of the drugs, 96% had financial relationships with manufacturers. In contrast, just 37% of those against their use had financial ties to the companies, while 60% of those neutral on the issue had links.

As industry money floods research institutions and academia, the process of deciding which sources can be trusted and which must be viewed with a generous pinch of salt has become increasingly difficult. The *NEJM* itself has had trouble identifying potential conflicts of interest, as demonstrated by a review of Sandra Steingraber's book, *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer*, in the Journal's November 1997 issue. The review – a scathing attack not only on the

book but environmentalism generally – was the first negative press for Steingraber's book, which had otherwise received widespread praise for its clear discussion of environmental contaminants and their links to cancers. The

"Chemophobia, the unreasonable [sic] fear of chemicals, is a common public reaction to scientific or media reports suggesting that exposure to various environmental contaminants may pose a threat to health."

article was signed "Jerry H. Berke, M.D., M.P.H., 49 Windsor Ave., Axton MA 01720", the way an unaffiliated medical practitioner would sign a review. As it turns out, Berke is actually director of toxicology for W. R. Grace – a major chemical manufacturer that was responsible

for contaminating the drinking water supply in Woburn, Massachusetts, a town where a group of children subsequently contracted childhood leukaemia.

Although all correspondence to Berke from the magazine was addressed to him at W.R. Grace, and the conflict-of-interest form he signed for the *NEJM* identified his connection to the company, the journal initially claimed ignorance of Berke's affiliations. Eventually, the *NEJM* editor-

Continued on page 2.

The Ecologist Campaigns & News

This section highlights current campaigns, reports activist news, and provides brief updates on topical issues, compiled by Julian Oram and Janey Francis. Send news items and/or campaigns to:

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ial staff admitted they knew that Berke was affiliated with W.R. Grace, but had thought Grace was a hospital.

Such conflicts of interest are not unusual, even for supposedly objective journals like the *NEJM*. Recently the editorial column of the journal was turned over to Stephen Safe, a researcher who last year received \$150,000 from the Chemical Manufacturers Association (CMA). Safe wrote in the editorial: "Chemophobia, the unreasonable [sic] fear of chemicals, is a common public reaction to scientific or media reports suggesting that exposure to various environmental contaminants may pose a threat to health." Safe later told *the Boston Globe*: "I felt a little twinge" about the potential for a conflict of interest in the editorial. "I can see how people would bring it up." He then went on to defend his position by adding: "There's hardly any life scientist in the country who hasn't had funding from the industry." A weak but sadly accurate statement, reflecting more than anything the need to beware of the supposed objectivity of a scientific community increasingly ruled not by the quest for truth, but by the mandates of corporate funding.

Source: Rachel's Environment and Health Weekly

Ovarian Cancer Risks for HRT Patients

Women who stay on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for more than 10 years increase their risks of developing fatal ovarian cancer by 70 per cent, a major new study has discovered. The discovery has been made by the American Cancer Society, which monitored 240,000 women who were about to start, or had just started menopause. Of these, 68,906 were on oestrogen replacement therapy or HRT. In the seven years they were tracked, 436 women died from ovarian cancer; 142 of these had used HRT.

So overwhelming is the evidence that doctors may be advised to tell patients of the increased risks if the drug is taken long-term. The research discovered that the risk increased the longer the women were on HRT, and it became significant among those who had taken the drug for longer than ten years. This is a big blow to the therapy, because it is viewed as a long-term treatment.

However, the researchers note that the study was carried out when the normal oestrogen replacement therapy dosage was 1.25mg. This dosage has recently been halved, which researchers presume could reduce the risks, although this also needs to be studied.

Source: Environment and Health News, Vol. 3, Jan. 1998.

NGOs Meet to Discuss *Sui Generis* Rights

A group of 45 representatives of indigenous, peasant, non-governmental and governmental organisations came together on 1-6 December 1997 in Thammasat, Thailand to discuss the increasing privatization of biodiversity and local knowledge. The seminar, attended by individuals from 19 nations, focussed specifically on the implications of the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, recently ratified by the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the resulting legislation at national and regional levels. The TRIPS agreement, which has its greatest impact on the nations of the South, obliges members of WTO states to provide some form of intellectual property rights system on native plant varieties by the year 2000. This governments can do through either patenting laws or a *sui generis*, or country-specific, system.

The Thammasat group pointed out that although TRIPS is sometimes seen as an opportunity for countries to establish rights over the biodiversity within their borders, the danger is that it will instead result in the loss of people's control over intellectual property rights, and add to corporate monopolisation of rights to plant varieties. They also noted that even *sui generis* rights may be developed in such a way as to remove the rights of ownership and access from the local people who use the living resources. In their Resolution statement, the Thammasat group emphasized the need for *sui generis* rights to exist independently of intellectual property on life forms or their genes or cells. The Resolution declares:

"Our rights are inalienable; they existed long before Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regimes were established. As legal, political, economic, social and cultural rights, they are part of peoples' sovereignty, and therefore part of human rights."

The representatives pledged to engage their societies – from the village level to national government – to campaign for *sui generis* rights for local communities and oppose international efforts to enforce any system of IPR on life forms. Specifically, the group called for action on:

- Revising the TRIPS treaty in order to allow countries to exclude life forms and biodiversity-related knowledge from IPR monopolies under the WTO.
- Reinforcing the ability of local communities to protect themselves from bio-prospecting and the introduction of genetically-modified organisms.
- Asserting the primacy of international agreements on biodiversity, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), over TRIPS and other trade regimes.
- Mobilising a strong global movement against TRIPS, engaging a wide range of groups in these campaigns

The statement invites other organisations, movements and peoples to join in the campaign.

For more information: Contact Genetic Resources Action International (GRAIN)
<grain@bcn.servicem.es>

Sinking the Narmada

In January, thousands of villagers in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh marched under cover of darkness to the site of one of India's most controversial development projects, the Maheshwar Dam. Inspired by the women of the community, the villagers arrived at dawn to stage a mass sit-in at the site of the unfinished dam, the focal point of the £3 billion Narmada Valley Development Project. As many as 25,000 protesters are thought to have descended on the remote site of the 100-foot high barrage.

Understandably, the project has angered local residents, whose homes and land will be lost as a result of flooding from the dam. Critics of the project, due to generate 400MW of hydro-power for users outside the region, claim that the dam would only produce energy for a few hours a day, and have highlighted the costs, including the loss of thousands of

acres of agricultural land and the destruction of the local economy. The families affected have been offered no compensation for the upheaval in their lives.

Protests against the damming of the river have been voiced for over ten years, and intense pressure from local and international groups led the World Bank to pull out of the project five years ago.

Digvijay Singh, the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, attempted to resolve the situation by offering to halt construction until after a meeting with local representatives. The villagers, however, were unmoved by the gesture. "The people have decided that they have given enough warning," a spokesman said. "We will not go until all work has been permanently stopped".

Source: The Guardian

Malaysian Forest People Attacked by Police

On the island of Sarawak, police using pistols and M16 rifles attacked without warning a number of Dayak Iban people during a peaceful protest in December of last year. Three people were critically injured, one of whom, Enyang Ak Gendang, died a week later.

The native people were protesting against the destruction of their farms and gardens by the oil palm plantation company, Empressa Ltd., and its contractors. The company had moved in without notice or consultation and begun to clear the land with bulldozers. The local people registered their objections at two police stations, but no action was taken against the company. Frustrated by the official inertia, villagers took control of three of the company's bulldozers and moved them to their longhouse, intending to prevent Empressa from continuing the land-clearing and to initiate a dialogue with the company. The company instead called in the police. Despite a visit from a truckload of police, the villagers refused to return the bulldozers,

since the company had made no promise to stop destroying their land.

The following day the police returned in greater numbers, in plain clothes and in uniform, but without identification. Some were recognized by the local people as being from the Malaysian peninsula, indicating that the actions of the officers concerned had the sanction of the federal government as well as the Sarawak State government. The village people gathered peacefully outside their longhouse, and photographs of the gathering show people smiling and joking with each other and making offerings to their ancestors. Nonetheless, the police rushed forward, attempting to arrest the headman, and orders were given to open fire on the unarmed people.

After the shootings, the police arrested 22 men, all of whom have been subsequently released without any charges against them pending a hearing at Marudi Magistrate's Court.

Petrochemical Development in Taiwan Threatens Local Communities and Wildlife

The Taiwanese government is poised to approve plans by Tuntex Consortium for a petrochemical complex and related development that will cause severe environmental problems for the local communities and regional wildlife. If the project goes ahead, one-third of the 35-kilometre habitat radius occupied by one of the rarest birds in the world, the black-faced spoonbill, would be destroyed. Furthermore, increased pollution, water salinity and changes to water temperature from the complex would significantly damage the Chi-gu fishery which currently employs 16,000 people. The local fisherpeople resent the image of them portrayed in the media as being poor and in need of jobs. A spokesperson for the local people said, "We know how to fish; we don't know how to work in a factory; we can support ourselves without this oil plant."

The complex would also produce an estimated increase of 31% in carbon dioxide emissions making it difficult for Taiwan to meet internationally agreed-upon emission levels. Taiwan is currently the 16th largest producer of carbon dioxide in the world.

Three new dams which would be constructed to serve the complex would cause

flooding of two local villages and alter the flow regimes of four rivers.

A coalition known as SAVE (Spoonbill Action Voluntary Echo) was formed in August 1997 to campaign against the building of the petrochemical plant. Since then members from the University of California at Berkeley and the National University of Taiwan have worked with more than 40 Taiwan environmental and social groups to raise the awareness of Taiwanese people as to the potentially devastating impact of the plant. Approval of the complex would be in violation of the biodiversity protection principle of the Rio Earth Summit's blueprint for sustainable development, to which Taiwan has committed itself.

SAVE has proposed an alternative economic development plan for the area which features green industry, ecotourism, jobs to keep young people from migrating to the cities and environmental protection. The plan anticipates 30,000 jobs and a revenue that would equal or exceed the petrochemical plant's projections.

SAVE contact:

Alan Lin,
fax 1-302-0588,
e-mail: <tlin@udel.edu>

Petroleum Versus Ecuadorian People

The US-based company Occidental Petroleum is maintaining its 30-year track record of wreaking havoc and environmental destruction in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Ever since Occidental began exploring for oil in the region, local communities have been plagued by serious health problems, including skin rashes, cancer, birth defects and spontaneous abortions. Due to unlined, open waste pits and ruptures in pipe lines, large quantities of raw crude oil and toxic drilling waste – driven by the heavy rains – have leaked into water sources over a wide area. A severely contaminated community near the oil boom town of Lago Agrio has a 98% malnutrition rate because the main source of protein – fish in local rivers – has been destroyed by pollutants. In the past twenty-five years, three major ruptures have coated the Aguarico rivers with a layer of petroleum 40 centimetres deep, forcing local people to fish miles away in smaller tributaries.

In the last six months, Occidental Petroleum has been pressuring the 450 remaining local Secoya people to sell the right to drill for oil on all 42,000 hectares of their territory. Their tactics have been less than subtle. Solar panels, computers and Christmas toys suddenly appeared in the schools and homes of the community. Political officials from the Secoya community have been taken to five-star hotels in the capital and on vacations to the coast and the United States. Secoya people have been promised top positions and highly paid jobs with the company. Following this campaign of bribes and extravagant promises, a referendum took place over the question of Occidental's oil exploration. 70% of the people voted for the corporation's right to enter, while the remaining 30% defended the right to protect their traditional land from oil drilling.

Those campaigning against Occidental are now requesting international support. "Occidental brought gifts of pots and pans for our kitchen. But what people need to realize is that with the company's presence on our land, we will have nothing to put in those pots and pans. We need long-term sustainable life and business in our jungle, not toxic chemicals contaminating our rivers."

Contact: Cesar Piaguaje, Casa de la cultura, 18 de Noviembre y Av. Combia, Nueva Loja, Sucumbios, Ecuador. Tel: 06-830-624, fax: 06-830-115.

Write to: CEO of Occidental Petroleum, Ray Irani, 10889 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles CA 90024.

Further information: Jan Smith, e-mail: <matone@zoo.uvm.edu>

Danube "Damosaurus"

Hungarian activists are continuing their fight to prevent the construction of a dam across the Danube that is being seen as the last anachronistic project of Stalinist gigantomania. The collusion between Austrian banking interests, the dam-building construction lobbies, the extreme nationalists in Slovakia, and the former Communists (MSZP) in Hungary is posing a very real threat to the survival of the unique wetlands which are the remains of the only inland sea delta in Europe.

The former communists, who do not stand a chance of winning the forthcoming election in April in Hungary, are attempting to conclude an out-of-court settlement with Slovakia before that time. Hungarian activists are working to convince some of the MSZP deputies to change their votes. They have also prepared a detailed compromise plan which would satisfy the desires of all parties involved. If this plan

were accepted, the region would benefit not only by the restoration of its agriculture and drinking water supplies, but also by receiving thousands of jobs during the reconstruction of the wetlands, and later through eco-tourism. The region would become an international nature reserve, operated as a "European Free Zone" where all residents (Austrians, Hungarians and Slovaks) could work and travel freely. The activists believe that this model of regional community and interdependence could later become the catalyst for similar projects of reconciliation throughout Central Europe.

For more details of the Compromise Plan:
<<http://www.ggodpoint.com/duna.htm>>

Campaign contact: Bela Liptakk, 84 Old N. Stamford Road, Stamford, CT 06905-3961 Tel: 001-203-357-7614. Fax: 001 203 325 3922. E-mail: <liptakk@aol.com>

Monsanto Monitor

Due to the amount of information we regularly receive on Monsanto's activities, we have decided to dedicate a section of every issue of the Campaigns to that giant corporation.

United Press International reported last December that Josh King, director of production for White House events, was transferring to Monsanto as their director of global co-ordination in the firm's Washington Office in January. This continues an interesting trend which began in the early 1980s when a top Monsanto executive was temporarily employed at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and guaranteed approval of Monsanto herbicide glyphosate, despite fraudulent toxicological studies done at an 'independent' mid-West laboratory.

Last year, Marcia Hale, assistant to the US president for intergovernmental relations, left the White House to join Monsanto as a senior official to co-ordinate public affairs and corporate strategy in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

This mixing of interests has reached further afield. In Thailand, according to recent news reports, the official cotton testing board responsible for testing Monsanto's 'Bollgard' cotton has three representatives of Monsanto as members. If the board's composition is not altered, Thai NGOs say they are ready to sue the agricultural ministry. Under the country's new 1998 Constitution, government bodies are not allowed to have appointees whose involvement with other groups or private businesses may result in a conflict of interest.

Organic Foods in Jeopardy

In a move that will only help large-scale agribusinesses take over the \$4 billion US organic foods market, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) released in December their proposal for a standardized definition of 'organic' foods, one which would sweep away the varying standards now employed by some 40 state and private organic certification bodies. The 600-page description of the farming and processing practices that would be permitted has angered consumers and small organic farmers alike. Among its other flaws, the USDA proposal would permit the 'organic' label to be applied to genetically-engineered plants and animals; to animals on which antibiotics have been used; to foods produced on 'factory farms'; and to foods which have been preserved by means of irradiation. The proposal would also make it illegal to uphold a higher standard for 'organic' than the weak federal rules.

A major impetus behind the new 'har-

monized' organic standards comes from the large agribusinesses that are poised to tap into the growing international trade in organic foods, and want a single, government-backed label to slap on their products. To such corporations 'organic' means only a potential source of profit, and the lower the standards to which the term can be applied, the better.

Many food safety activists and long-time organic farmers argue that if the weak federal standards are passed, the term 'organic' will become meaningless, and a new word will be required. In the meantime, people are urged to write or fax the USDA demanding the withdrawal of the organic standards proposal. The deadline for submission is May 1, 1998.

Write to: USDA National Organic Standards, Docket # TMD-94-00-2, USDA, AMS, Room 4007-S, AgStop 0275, P.O. Box 96456, Washington, DC. 20090-6456; or send a fax to the following number: (202) 690 4632.

Local Food Directory Makes Instant Impact

A new initiative has been launched in the UK in the Forest of Dean, aimed at promoting stronger ties between the region's food producers and consumers. Comprising a list of food and drinks producers who are selling local products, the 'Forest Food Directory' is attempting to build a trade structure capable of delivering fresh, high-quality foods to local consumers at affordable prices, and to provide a healthier, more economic and environmentally-beneficial alternative to supermarket shopping. The Directory will also offer general information on food miles and genetic engineering issues, LETS programmes, and Women's Institutes markets.

Organisers of the Directory point out that large, centralized food retail outlets use more preservatives, more long-distance transport and more packaging. They also favour large-scale, industrial farms using monocropping and intensive animal husbandry methods, which in turn are heavily dependent on chemical fertilisers, pesticides, hormones, and vaccinations.

It is hoped the Directory will stimulate local trade by giving a platform for smallholders to sell their produce directly to consumers. By stimulating local economic activity, much of the need for packaging would be eliminated, and traffic from long-distance freight hauliers would be reduced. By cutting out the supermarket retailers, producers would also benefit through a better profit margin while simultaneously building up a loyal customer base. The programme's goal of strengthening the position of small-scale producers also has the benefit of promoting farm-related employment, a sector devastated in the UK (as elsewhere) by large-scale mechanized production. A large number of small producers also enhances on-farm diversity, thereby increasing long-term agricultural stability and improving wildlife habitats.

The Forest Food Directory is not the only initiative seeking to shorten the gap between producers and consumers. Farmer's markets and community supported agriculture programmes, for example, are becoming increasingly popular throughout the country. Since the broadcast of the Bath Farmer's market in September on national radio, the Bath City Council has been inundated with telephone enquiries from other local authorities looking to run similar events.

Write to: Matt Dunwell, Ragman's Lane Farm, Lower Lydbrook, Gloucestershire GL17 9PA, if you have any more information on similar initiatives in the UK

Contact: Ecological Books, 19 Maple Grove, Bath BA2 3AF, UK for more information on the Bath Farmer's market

Source: Permaculture Magazine, no.16

The Real Story Behind the European Biotech Patent Directive

For millennia, indigenous peoples and farmers have observed, selected and refined plants and their own knowledge of them, bequeathing to us an immense wealth of wisdom and varieties. But recent developments in biotechnology mean that corporations are now racing to claim genetic materials to own and manipulate for profit. This appropriation of biodiversity, including human genes, is graphically illustrated by intensifying processes within the European Union (EU) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In these institutions, patent laws are being reviewed to legalize monopoly control and manipulation of life, while the groundwork is being prepared to lay down a uniform system of patents on life worldwide.

Patents were originally intended to balance the rights of innovator and society. The principle allowed the innovator to be rewarded for developing an invention, while society would be able to use it and the research and knowledge involved in developing it would enter the public domain. Corporations, however, are now attempting to use patents for totally different purposes: to extend ownership over the 'raw materials' of life itself. They are using patents to block the access to genes, cells and even whole organisms, and to profit from all further work with those materials, either by refusing to license their use or by charging a royalty.

Corporations are now seeking to enshrine their rights over living resources in a special European directive on patents in biotechnology: the "EU Draft Directive on the Legal Protection of Biotechnological Inventions". This directive is explicitly designed to enable corporations to stake their claims on living organisms and their component parts. It also gives specific protection to genetic engineering, which provides the "inventive step" necessary to obtain patents on living materials. The directive therefore gives a clear incentive to a technology which is still in its infancy, but which involves changing the genetic structure of life itself. By enabling scientists to insert the genetic material of one species into another, it crosses boundaries which nature has so far kept inviolate. These changes cannot be made through normal breeding practices. Patents as they are now being used encourage all these activities and protect their products. In short, they are no longer being used to balance rights, but to give monopoly control over the biological material which is the basis of our food and medicine.

Corporations now claim that genetically engineered foods are the only way to feed the world's growing human population, and say that those who reject them are selfishly condemning millions to starvation. Yet many in the public suspect (with good reason) that corporations are more interested in profit than feeding the hungry. The problem of hunger lies not in the production, but in the distribution of food. Corporations are focussing on crops like soya, rape and maize which are used as additives in processed food, as well as for non-food products such as industrial oils. They are lobbying against the segre-

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gation and labelling of genetically engineered ingredients, and if allowed to get away with it, will soon be smuggling genetically engineered ingredients into almost every processed food we buy.

At the same time, the alternatives to corporate control of our food are being eliminated. For thousands of years farmers have enhanced biodiversity and produced the varieties which have underpinned food security. Corporations such as Monsanto are now bullying producers to sign contracts which dictate every step of their practice, and deny them their inalienable rights to save, exchange, develop and sell seed. This reduces farm-

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ers to mere contract labourers for corporations. In Europe, it is now illegal to sell seed which is not on the official seed list. Farmer varieties may not fulfil the industrial criteria of being stable, uniform and distinctly necessary for inclusion, and obtaining a listing is expensive for small-scale producers. The United States Department of Agriculture is now arguing that the title 'organic' should be applied to genetically engineered food which has not been exposed

to pesticides, and Europe will soon be put under pressure to do the same. Cross-pollination between plants that have been genetically engineered and those which have not could soon lead to widespread genetic pollution, rendering the term 'organic' meaningless. In addition, small-scale local production will find it increasingly hard to compete against supermarket chains working with corporate producers.

The Biotech Patent Directive was first introduced by the European Commission in 1988 and thrown out by the European Parliament in 1995 after a long struggle.

The Commission swiftly introduced a new draft with very few changes. In July 1997, the European Parliament made 66 amendments to it, which sought to limit its scope in some areas (for example, with regard to human embryos and cloning), and to monitor its impacts. However, none of these amendments excluded living materials from patenting. The Commission then changed and reorganized most of the amendments and openly rejected one of them: an article designed to control biopiracy, the theft of human genes and genetic resources developed over millennia by indigenous peoples and farmers. The article called for the source of the material to be named, and prior informed consent to be obtained in the case of human donors.

In this process, the vote of a democratically elected body, the European Parliament, has been overruled by an unelected, unaccountable body, the Commission. In November 1997, the Council of European Ministers adopted the Commission's version of the directive with very few changes. Holland voted against the directive and Italy and Belgium abstained; the rest all voted in favour. In order to reinstate Parliamentary amendments or introduce their own, the Council of Ministers would have had to make a unanimous decision. The example throws a revealing light on the balance of power between European institutions.

The progress of the directive also demonstrates that there has been a shift in the European position on patenting life. In the past, when the US wished to enforce life patents, Europe held the balance and sided with the countries of the Southern Hemisphere during negotiations, leaving a small but important space for countries to develop their own *sui generis* laws and to exclude plants and animals from patenting. If the directive were adopted as it now stands, it would

show the world that Europe has clearly shifted towards the position of the US, leaving the way open for patents on life to be imposed worldwide.

The very idea of a commercial monopoly on living materials, which are the basis of our food and medicine, is anti-democratic. It would lead to a global society becoming completely dependent on private corporations for the fulfilment of its fundamental needs, including people in less industrialized countries who are still relatively self-sufficient. It opens the way to the kind of corporate dictatorship already foreshadowed by the attempt to impose genetically engineered food on an unwilling public against the will of the majority. Moreover, the public have been conspicuously excluded from consultation and decision-making throughout this process. There has been no attempt to balance the private rights being accumulated by corporations with the public good; instead corporations seek to persuade us that their interests are our interests. Government departments of trade, agriculture, environment and development deal with different aspects of the issue without coherence, making it easy for corporate interests to divide and play on ignorance. The result is that people are becoming cut off from their own sovereignty, self-determination and means of subsistence, to which they have a fundamental human right. Citizens are being reduced to consumers. Diversity in livelihood systems, agriculture and knowledge is being eliminated as industrial monocultures are imposed.

Ultimately, this is a struggle between two world-views. The first uses the logic of profit accumulation to devalue everything except short-term gain and economic growth at all costs. Life becomes a commodity for exploitation. This leads inevitably to a situation where diversity of any kind, human rights, democracy and ethics is merely regarded as a barrier to so-called 'free trade'. The underlying assumption of this world-view is that we can become independent of the

planetary ecosystem through our technologies, and force it to serve us.

The other world-view is where the Gaia Hypothesis of James Lovelock meets with the cosmological world-view of indigenous peoples such as the Tukano Indians of Colombia. They hold that we are all part of a finite, immensely subtle, interactive system, which we should observe, respect and try to understand in order to find our proper place in it and live within its limits. If we do not, we risk perturbing natural systems and eradicating biological diversity to such an extent that our own human survival would be threatened.

If we want to affirm the latter world-view, the next few months are critical. The second reading of the directive on patents on life will take place in May in

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the European Parliament. Other events in Europe include meetings of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Bratislava, and the Second Ministerial Conference of the WTO in Geneva, both in May. The months preceding these meetings provide opportunities to raise awareness of the issues at stake and to change the context in which negotiations take place. Now is the moment to highlight the impacts on democracy and diversity of the ownership and manipulation of life.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King both taught that to take no action in the face of oppression is to collude with it. It is crucial to act now: this is a defining moment for global democracy and all our futures. What Europe decides on patents on life and genetically engineered foods will either open the floodgates to both, or re-establish a process of trying to balance

rights. Resistance to the oppression embodied in the privatisation of living material and its manipulation for profit is needed everywhere. Resistance movements need to link up in a global response to this oppression. We have to be clear that some things are non-negotiables. This will be a liberating and empowering way to link up with each other and reclaim space for diversity, democracy and life itself.

There are many actions we can all take in resisting the ownership and manipulation of life. Here are just a few suggestions:

- Say no to genetically engineered foods.
- Insist on segregation and clear labelling of genetically engineered ingredients and products so that you can avoid them.
- Buy locally produced organic food – and fight against the attempt to describe genetically engineered food as organic.
- Monitor legislation on intellectual property rights in your country and make sure it is not being changed to introduce patents on living organisms and their parts.
- Monitor attempts to test or produce genetically engineered animals or plants in your locality and organize local resistance.
- Contact groups in your own country and elsewhere which are trying to resist the imposition of patents on life and genetic engineering.
- Get the issue into the media through protests and actions against patents on life and against genetic engineering.
- Write to your Parliament or Congress and your government and call on them to resist patents on life.

Contact: The Gaia Foundation, 18 Well Walk, London NW3 1LD, UK, Tel: 44 171 431 5000, Fax: 44 171 431 9551, e-mail: <gaiafund@gn.apc.org>

Genetic Resources Action and Information Network (GRAIN), Girona 25, pral., E-8010 Barcelona, Spain; Tel: 34 3 301 1381, Fax: 34 3 301 1627, e-mail: <grain@bcn.servicom.es>

One in Six Killed or Injured in Australian Hospitals

Australians may want to think twice before their next trip to the clinic. The chances of dying in hospital, or suffering some injury while there, stand at around 16% in Australia. Half this risk is due to doctor or hospital error – which means that 8% of hospital patients are accidentally killed or injured by the staff.

These frightening statistics are the result of the world's first survey into hospital safety, which was commissioned by the Australian Department of Health. Conducted jointly by the Adelaide and Newcastle universities in Australia, the study examined admissions at 28 South Australian and New South Wales hospitals.

According to the findings, hospitals are the third largest killer in Australia. The survey found that up to 14,000 patients died in hospitals in 1992 as a result of mistakes, while a further 30,000 suffered permanent injury. In all, about 230,000 people – or 8% of all admission that year – suffered some kind of injury caused by a mistake. Their injuries lasted less than a month in half the cases and less than 12 months in another 30% of cases. It has been estimated that the injuries cost the Australian health system an additional 650 million Australian Dollars.

Half the errors occurred during surgery, another 13% from errors in dia-

gnosis and 15% as the result of inadequate training, supervision or communication, including such things as misplaced test results. Badly labelled and prescribed drugs were also to blame, although anaesthetics, thought to be a major culprit, in fact accounted for only 2% of injuries. The study found that the group aged over 60 were at greatest risk.

The Australian medical establishment, with one eye on likely litigation suits, were quick to condemn the findings, describing them as "alarmist" and unfair, since they included minor injuries.

Source: Environment and Health News, Vol. 3, Jan. 1998

Euratom – the Clauses of Cancer

The European Commission is known for its efforts to 'harmonise' everything from taxation to turnips across Europe. On the face of it, Council Directive 96/29/EURATOM is just another example, setting standards for radioactivity. But hidden in the text are clauses that actually mean a dramatic fall in standards and a flood of radioactive materials into landfills (which are rarely watertight) and incinerators (sending the ash into the air). Waste could even be recycled into consumer goods!

Below a certain level of radioactivity, companies won't even have to state that it is nuclear waste that they are selling – it will be up to the buyer to find out. A substance could be made less radioactive just by diluting it – even though highly radioactive particles may remain within it. Manufacturers simply won't know if the metal, plastic or glass they are making into consumer products contains radioactive substances.

The waste in question would be 'low level waste' – the most common and bulky category. It includes machinery, metal containers, clothing, concrete, glass, plastic, water ... all sorts of leftovers from the nuclear industry. It is the biggest headache for nuclear power, as all avenues for cheap disposal have been closed off one by one over the years.

If the mountain of low level waste could be disposed of cheaply, or even sold,

the nuclear industry could be poised for a comeback. The huge amounts of research given to it for free and the lack of proper insurance against accidents are still not enough to make it competitive – unless the waste problem is solved. The importance of Euratom is far more than just 'harmonisation'.

So is low-level radiation harmful? Evidence of the danger comes from a

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series of cancer clusters around nuclear installations, which routinely emit low-level radiation. In the last two years alone, there have been four separate studies showing severe health effects from this kind of radiation.

The Euratom directive claims that below a certain level, industrial radiation is not worse than natural 'background radiation'. But unlike natural radiation, which is easily excreted, industrial isotopes such as strontium-90 and iodine-131 become concentrated in particular areas of our bodies, subjecting certain parts of our anatomies to continual doses of radiation. Euratom would allow some of these

'unimportant' industrial isotopes at levels 2.5 to 2.5 million times higher than current UK safety standards permit. While some isotopes do have improved standards under the Euratom directive, the ones being released from restriction are in fact those more likely to cause health risks. Even worse, 'clearance levels' will allow anyone to sell on low level waste without having to label it as such.

The Green Party is organising a number of actions to help block the Euratom directive. To support this campaign:

- Contact the Green Party and ask for a copy of their petition. Photocopy it and circulate as widely as possible
- Let the Green Party know of your support for their campaign against the Euratom directive, and they can keep you informed of developments
- Work with local groups concerned with nuclear safety, health or environmental issues
- Campaign to raise awareness
- Lobby your MP and MEP at their surgeries.
- Write letters to the local and national press.

For more information on this campaign contact:
The Green Party,
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Resistance Grows to Toxic Waste Site

In the rural Cher region of central France, local people have been battling to fight plans to install a toxic waste dump site on their doorstep. In France, the state decrees that every region should be responsible for their toxic waste, including industrial by-products such as arsenic, mercury and asbestos. Graded as "Dechets Ultimes – Classe 1", these substances rank second to nuclear waste in terms of toxicity. The company France Dechets, which has the monopoly in dealing with such waste, disposes of the products by 'stabilising' them and burying them underground. The company chooses a site, buries 40,000 tons of toxic waste per year for thirty years, and then covers the site up, leaving the local community to deal with any future mishaps. While the company claim there are no risks in this method, they also admit that the substances are by nature unpredictable, and there is no absolute assurance of how they will react in the future.

An independent geological study of the Cher site shows that the water table lies at a depth of just ten metres under the surface. The method used by France

Dechets requires digging fifteen metres down to bury the waste – indicating that the water table is at risk from contamination. Further studies have shown that two fault lines cross the area large enough to be of critical danger if toxic waste is buried underground. In addition to this, the law stipulates that sites should have a certain level of clay in the earth. However, the site chosen by France Dechets is just off a large area of clay-concentrated land. Why was the site chosen? The owner of the land has strong connections with Lyonnaise des Eaux, of which France Dechets is an affiliate.

France is lagging behind other European countries such as England and Germany in its approaches to dealing with the toxic waste problem. The reason for this, according to the French Green Party, is that France profits from its waste incinerators, even dealing with waste from other countries to increase its revenue. Although alternative methods of dealing with toxic waste exist, the government has been reluctant to give them support due to the lack of financial incentives these options give.

There are, however, some encouraging

signs. France's Minister for the Environment, Mme Voynet, has recently called for a tackling of the problem at source, particularly to help control domestic waste, the incineration of which is responsible for 80% of the total toxic waste generated in the country. With regard to the Cher campaign, one of France's national newspapers, *Le Monde*, featured a full page article on the issue in January – a triumph for the local campaigners. Madame le Prefet, the government's spokesperson and final decision-maker on the issue, has given a provisional refusal for construction of the site – though some fear this may simply be a stalling tactic as she is generally thought to be in favour of the project. Policy is beginning to change, but continued public pressure will be vital in ensuring that it is translated into action. The final decision is due to be taken at the end of March.

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Cyprus's Last Wilderness Under Threat

The last area of wilderness in the Mediterranean island of Cyprus is facing an uncertain future. The relatively remote and unspoilt peninsula of Akamas, home of the famed Baths of Aphrodite, has been targeted for the development of tourism. The windswept and rugged area, on the north-west of the island, is covered by stretches of ancient forest and is home to endangered green and loggerhead turtles. Key players in developing the area have been Thanos Holdings, who ten years ago were responsible for large-scale bulldozing and dynamiting in order to construct a luxury hotel on a stretch of beach called Asprokremos, known for its spectacular white cliffs. The hotel, still incomplete, already visually dominates the local landscape, and is likely to lead to the development of associated facilities which will weaken resistance to subsequent planning applications.

Throughout Cyprus, the government's commitment to expanding the tourist industry has overridden their concern about the country's natural resources. Unfortunately, conservation receives little public support also in Akamas, as many local people are attracted by the idea of higher spending in the region from affluent tourists and a rise in property value. Cyprus, however, remains one of the most militarized places on Earth, and because of its divided nature, is still vulnerable to internal turmoil that could seriously disrupt the influx of foreign visitors. Furthermore, instability in the wider region (such as that caused by the Gulf War) has seriously disrupted tourism in the past, and has the potential to do so in the future. Destroying the landscape also makes the island less attractive for foreign tourists (particularly those from northern Europe), who enjoy the opportunity for walking and mountain biking in the rugged landscape of Akamas.

Sadly, the insecurity and tensions on Cyprus have led to a development ethic which emphasises short-term gain for immediate consumption. The government risks throwing away their natural and historical heritage in order to convert their island into a one-industry economy. With all the uncertainties which tourism holds, Cypriots are in danger of putting all their eggs into a basket where the bottom is likely to drop out at any time.

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In Brief

Survey Tests UK's Environmental Attitudes

The survey company Experian has conducted a poll of the UK public to test people's views on the environment. The study, based on interviews with 225,000 people up and down the country, found that women were more environmentally responsive than men in every region of the UK. It also showed that less well-off people were far more likely to be environmentally responsible than wealthier people. In every region except Yorkshire the majority feel that cars should be banned from city-centres, while an overwhelming 98% of all respondents believe that the environment is under threat.

Tribe Win Recognition of Rights

One of Amazonia's last nomadic tribes, the Nukak, recently won a landmark decision on their land rights from the Colombian government. The Nukak have been facing extinction from diseases brought in by outsiders invading their lands to plant coca, the plant from which cocaine is made. With no immunity to these illnesses, half of all Nukak have died from disease since 1988. A six-year campaign led by Survival has prompted the government to expand a reserve established in 1991 to include all the Nukak lands.

People's Global Action against 'Free' Trade and the WTO

Representatives of people's movements from all continents met in Geneva in late February to co-ordinate worldwide resistance to the global market, and to launch a new alliance of mutual support. People's Global Action seeks to facilitate communication and co-ordination among all those whose concern for humanity and the planet leads them to oppose the continued spread and growth of the global market. The conference in February planned actions specifically targeted at the second Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation, to be held in Geneva 18–20 May, 1998.

Further information: Request PGA bulletin by e-mailing <playfair@asta.rwth-aachen.de>; or contact PGA's web site at <<http://www.agp.org>>

Organic Banking

The Soil Association and the Triodos Bank have launched an investment programme to help support organic farming in the UK. The Organic Saver Account, set up by the Bristol-based bank, will provide organic farmers with loans to fund the growing, processing, distributing and retailing of their produce. Enquiries for loans and banking services from the organic sector have doubled in the past six months, and Triodos now has a new loan manager dedicated to the industry. At the end of each year, the bank will donate to the Soil Association 25% of the funds invested in the new accounts.

Source: Organic Food News UK

Enquiries: Tel: 0500 008 720

Multi-Drug-Resistant Plague

In 1348–49, the Black Death wiped out a quarter of Europe's population. The disease has been largely controlled by better hygiene, but never fully eradicated, and has continued to crop up in Europe on a regular (if very limited) basis. The last global pandemic of bubonic plague started in Hong Kong in 1894, transmitted mainly via flea bites. The last significant European outbreak was as recent as 1922.

Recently the Pasteur Institute in Paris has isolated a new strain of the Plague, which is resistant to both of the classic drug therapies. Found in a boy from Madagascar, it was eventually controlled with streptomycin injections. The *New England Journal of Medicine* states that the dangerous new multi-drug-resistant strain is likely to have been spread by sewer rats. The deadly virus has most likely developed resistance through mutations caused by the overuse of antibiotics, rather than through natural evolution.

Source: Environment and Health News. Vol. 3, Jan. 1998.

Recycling Bugs

A new study from INSERM, the French government medical agency, has found that people working in air-conditioned buildings suffer more than twice as many respiratory problems as those working in naturally-ventilated buildings. The researchers suggest that air-conditioning recirculates bacteria and fungi, which spread infection and may account for the so-called Sick Building Syndrome.

Source: Environment and Health News. Vol. 3, Jan. 1998.