

COMMENTARY

THE CONSERVATION CRISIS A Proposed New Federal Agency for Research on the Environment

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Ornithologists have historically played a key role in addressing environmental issues in the United States. Because birds are highly visible and of interest to a large portion of the public, they often have served as focal points either in efforts to alleviate specific environmental problems (for example, DDT's effect on Peregrine Falcons), or to help conserve entire ecosystems (such as the Spotted Owl and old-growth forests in the Northwest and Southwest). Funding for research to address environmental problems, however, is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. Funding available from traditional agencies (such as the National Science Foundation) has declined to such an extent that money is not available for all meritorious proposals. As questions in conservation become more complex, research that involves many different disciplines is required, but the majority of the current funding sources consider such projects to be untraditional and risky. Finally, as the degradation of the world's natural resources accelerates, a larger percentage of environmental research must help address specific management issues, something that all too often can mark a proposal as not fundable because it is perceived as "not doing basic science."

Critical research on environmental problems is often limited by international treaties and national regulations. Many of the last remaining populations of birds and other wildlife (including most threatened plants) are found on public lands. Laws and regulations designed originally to protect species may in some cases inordinately hamper research that could provide information needed for those species' preservation. This problem is compounded because conservation decisions often have important economic ramifications, and because of the lack of cooperation and coordination among governmental agencies. For example, the current missions of several federal and state agencies in the United States may in some cases be perceived as in direct conflict with conservation decisions. These agencies could potentially deter independent research on public lands.

Recently a diverse group of scientists and administrators (including ornithologists) proposed the creation of a new federal agency that would coordinate

funding of research on environmental issues. As the conservation crisis has grown, it has become increasingly clear that more research is needed, funding for conservation has not kept pace with that need, and what monies are available are often scattered over many different existing federal and state programs. Hopefully, a new agency could provide new money and help determine the priority of exemplary proposals to ensure disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and applied work are completed. Additionally, it could help adjudicate decisions about research on public lands and on protected species. This would help fill the gap in funding and coordination between the fundamental research support by the National Science Foundation and the narrow focus of the land management and regulatory agencies like the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Energy.

One name suggested for this agency is the "National Institutes for the Environment" or NIE. This name was chosen in part to emphasize that a precedent already exists for the creation of federal research agencies that are specifically designed to address problems of national concern (e.g. the National Institutes of Health). An environmental research agency probably would function much like the National Institutes of Health in the health sciences. Its main purpose would be to encourage environmental research and student training through competitive, peer-reviewed grants (including both extramural and intramural projects) and to act as a central clearing house for information and research results. The NIE would necessarily be highly interdisciplinary and might include individual institutes devoted to such social and economic issues as sustainable resource use and changing human environments. The focus would be on research directed toward problems such as the preservation of biological diversity, ecosystem management and restoration, and global change.

In most cases, the creation of another federal bureaucracy is a poor solution to any problem. But organizations like the National Institutes of Health have served the needs of the nation for high-quality research and training in the health sciences very well. Indeed, many of our most difficult health problems have been solved with the aid of the National Institutes of Health. The environmental "crisis" is so important that new and innovative approaches must be tried. The NIE will not be a panacea: much work will remain to be done at all levels. If it can function as a

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successful conduit for more environmental research and education by providing research dollars and helping to determine critical problems, it will be an important step in the right direction. Many professional societies (including the AOU at its last meeting in Los Angeles) have passed resolutions in support of the concept of an environmental research institute.

Proposals for the NIE are in a formative stage. Congress recently appropriated \$400,000 for the National Academy of Sciences to study the feasibility of NIE. Because decisions made at the federal level have such

a strong impact on both birds and individual research programs, it is very important that ornithologists be aware of NIE, and that they have input into its design. A committee has been established in Washington, D.C., to promote the formation of NIE and to act as a liaison among scientists, university administrators, and governmental organizations. For further information, contact David Blockstein, Committee for the National Institutes for the Environment, 730 11th Street NW, Washington, DC 20001-4521 (telephone 202-628-4303).