

Science out and about

Linking science and politicians

Jim Smith, a mathematical modeller and expert on radioactive pollution at the Centre of Ecology & Hydrology (CEH), Dorset, recently spent a week in Westminster shadowing Jim Knight, the Minister for Rural Affairs, Landscape and Biodiversity. The visit was part of a pairing scheme set up by the Royal Society to build bridges between some of the best research workers in the country and members of the UK

parliament. Mike Billett, an atmospheric scientist from CEH, Edinburgh, is also taking part, and has been paired with David Hamilton, Labour MP for Midlothian. Jim Smith said, 'It was fascinating to see the contrasts between the scientific and political worlds. MPs seem to work to amazingly tight deadlines and have to quickly get a grasp on a wide variety of different subjects. We scientists, on the

other hand, have the luxury of analysing things in much greater detail. I think I'll be glad to get back to the relative peace and quiet of my lab.' The Minister, who will reciprocate by visiting CEH, Dorset, said, 'I'm looking forward to getting a more hands-on view of how science is conducted in the laboratory so I have a better understanding of how to use scientific evidence when making policy decisions.'

'Real' science for school students

Sixteen-year-old John Readman was one of 600 students who enjoyed some 'real' science last summer with the help of a bursary from the Nuffield Foundation. John joined a working research environment in the Plymouth Marine Laboratory (PML—a NERC collaborative centre), where he became a scientist much earlier than he had ever dreamt.

John's five-week project tested how toxic buckyballs (C60 Buckminsterfullerene) are to the immune systems of marine mussels. Michael Moore, of PML, said, 'John has helped us move the project forward six months. He did most of the

experimental work; it was a great help!' John's results showed that the carbon nanoparticles are toxic above certain concentrations. Further studies will investigate how long-term low-level exposure to the chemical could affect aquatic animals.

John said, 'This was one of the most inspiring projects I've ever been involved in. It really opened my eyes to science and definitely focused my love of research. I would recommend it to other students.'

Research centres, universities and industry across the UK have been

taking part in the Nuffield Bursary Scheme for ten years, and more than 5800 students have benefited. Teenagers rarely have the chance to be close to contemporary science, and the scheme introduces them to a world where experiments are real and the results meaningful. They can make science fun both for the student and the project provider.

For more information on the Nuffield Bursary Scheme, and other activities linking school students and working research scientists, visit the RCUK Science in Society website: www.rcuk.ac.uk/sis/

Reporting on research

Over the summer, Helen Margerison, a NERC-funded geoscientist at Edinburgh University, spent her time learning first hand how the media works. She had a placement as part of the Media Fellowship scheme, run by the BA (British Association for the Advancement of Science), which aims to help scientists understand how the media machine operates.

As part of the scheme, Helen reported from the BA Festival of Science in Dublin. She experienced life from the other side, attending press conferences and interviewing scientists. 'It became very apparent, very quickly that it's essential to communicate your science effectively,' said Helen. 'Otherwise, with so many competing stories, you definitely won't make the news! Even though I was not working under the same pressures as the professional journalists, I still sifted through my pile of releases, ignoring many and ending up with only a few that were well written and clear.'

The other key, as Helen discovered, was for the scientists to tell their story with an interesting angle. 'One of the most entertaining parallels was made by a researcher who had been studying brain development in teenagers—Harry Enfield's character Kevin the Teenager. The press had so much fun reporting the story the next day!'

NERC is one of the sponsors of the Media Fellowship scheme. If you're a researcher and are interested in taking part, see www.the-ba.net/mediafellows. Applications for the 2006 Fellowships open in early February.



From left to right in the photo: Mike Moore, John Readman, Dave Lowe and Jim Readman.