

Conference

Projecting Science into Society

University of Cambridge, UK

March 20 and 21, 2001

Report by Oliver Goodenough and Nancy Lane

On March 20 and 21, the Gruter Institute sponsored a conference at the University of Cambridge Department of Zoology on the uses of science in society. The gathering, called "Projecting Science into Society," examined the influence of law, religion, politics and the media on the public understanding of science. The event brought together a remarkably diverse and distinguished panel of speakers, ranging from Professor Sir Robert May, President of the Royal Society, to Dr. Philip Campbell, Editor of *Nature*, and Anjana Ahuja, science feature writer for *The London Times*, to authors A.S. Byatt and Matt Ridley. The law panelists included Dr. Simon Deakin (Cambridge), Dr. Zakaria Erzinclioglu (Cambridge), Prof. Oliver Goodenough (Vermont), and Prof. David Wirth (Boston College). The principal organizers were Prof. Goodenough for the Gruter Institute and Dr. Nancy Lane for the Cambridge Zoology Department.

Popular views of science often confound scientists. Like an image projected through a cracked lens, the expected outlines emerge twisted and distorted. The starting point for the conference was the premise that these new and different shapes are not a product of accident, inattention or simple antipathy. Relatively few members of society are exposed to science directly; rather, most encounter it second hand, through the mediation of other societal institutions. The view of science projected by these institutions has been stretched, blurred and re-focused to meet their own internal needs and dynamics. If we understand the rules of these transformations, we can begin to make choices about how - and whether - to counteract them.

The first area to be highlighted dealt with the interaction of science and the law, in a session, chaired by Oliver Goodenough, entitled "Never Mind Uncertainty - We Need a Result." Law requires certainty; science more usually deals with probability, though legal and scientific "truths" may both be the result of an evolutionary process. Scientists tend to caution, and are then accused of evasion in a legal process where "not yet known" is an impossible verdict. Uncertainty in legal matters is resolved by restating the problem into a series of questions with "yes/no" answers. At the end of the process, an answer - whatever it's extrinsic merits - is presented. In this drive to a conclusion, science provides a smoke screen as often as a controlling analytic framework.

The other sessions included a discussion of science and religion, entitled "Show Us God in Action," a panel on science and the media called "Facts or Fights?" and presentations on politics and science called "Is Science a Solution or a Threat?" The conference program closed with Prof. Patrick Bateson (Cambridge) presenting the history of his work on deer hunting by dogs, a case study in social controversy for the National Trust. There was a follow-on evening debate organized as part of the University of Cambridge Science Week, chaired by Matt Ridley. The Wellcome Trust also provided financial support for the programs.