

# THE PHYCOLOGIST



The Newsletter of the British Phycological Society

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Home page: <http://www.brphycsoc.org/>

Number 61

April 2002

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## Editorial

Considerable controversy has been stirred up recently because of the agreement by the US journal *Science* (*Science* 296, 5 April 2002) to allow only restricted access to published data on the genetic sequence of one important rice variety, *Oryza sativa* L ssp. *japonica*. Rice is the world's most important food crop and the first ever staple crop to be analysed in detail and this was heralded in *Science*, quite rightly, as a major advance, accompanied by a front cover splash, an editorial and a pull out supplement. This decision is, however, anathema to many scientists who would generally consider that all published scientific information should be freely available without restriction and easily accessible. The problem seems to be that an agribusiness company called Syngenta carried out the sequencing of this rice genome and the concern, presumably, is that commercial competitors might profit from work that has involved considerable financial investment. Several issues arise from these events, such as why would a commercial organisation want to publish these results in the scientific literature anyway and to what extent can this information be patented? These are questions that are becoming increasingly common in academia. Perhaps of particular importance for us is the impact such attitudes may have on the publication of commercially important results from phycological research. The nub of the problem with the sequencing of the rice genome is that rice is a crop of considerable global agronomic importance and this information will undoubtedly be of use in the future for increasing grain yield and quality. The same importance could not be said, perhaps, of any alga/cyanobacterium, although we should not be too quick to dismiss the significance of these events for phycology. There are increasing attempts at exploiting more fully the commercial potential of many algae or cyanobacteria in the pharmaceutical, food and waste treatment industries. Clearly, an understanding of the genomes of these commercially important species would aid in their industrial exploitation. Perhaps now is the time to resolve these conflicting issues before we are overtaken by subsequent events.

