

A Postcard from Brazil

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Brazil only tends to make UK news on issues of climate change or loss of biodiversity in Amazonia, irrespective of its growing importance to the world as an emerging economy. UN figures indicate that by 2015, Brazil is likely to be the world's largest producer of agricultural products and currently is the world's biggest producer of cotton and biofuels based on sugar cane. The success story that is Brazilian agriculture (agribusiness represents 29% of Brazil's GDP, 37% of total exports and of all jobs, and sustains the Brazilian trade balance) and the country's overall growing economic prosperity has been made possible by the strong commitment and investment by its Government to their scientific infrastructure, human resources, technology development and targeted research.

For a scientist visiting Brazil it is apparent that the UK have both common and complementary interests in science and innovation that could be developed for mutual benefit. In agriculture, Brazil has a track record of success with biofuels, their research is applied, very market focused and linked well to their farming community. The UK specialises in high quality fundamental agri-science, has technology based agri-businesses and is committed to growing its bio-economy. We also share concerns over climate change, environmental degradation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Brazil's diverse natural ecosystems and abundance of unique biodiversity are on a scale unimaginable for most in the UK, and yet the task of identifying, recording and generating benefit for Brazil from this vast biological resource is overwhelming. The UK has a distinguished history of biological collection, recording and of ecological study on an international scale, with world renowned institutions and expertise.

It was for these reasons that Brazil is considered a key partner country for the UK and why a group including Patricia Nuttall (NERC Centre of Ecology Hydrology), John Lucas (BBSRC Rothamsted Research), John Sime (Bioscience for Business KTN), John Wood (Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils), Philip Esler (Arts and Humanities Research Council) and I, accompanied



Sir David King to Brazil, at the end of March to launch the UK-Brazil Year of Science (YoS), part of the UK-Brazil 2006 Joint Action Plan on Science and Innovation. The YoS is providing a framework around which to formulate a comprehensive approach to our UK-Brazil research engagements.

Our delegation was able to visit a number of key scientific institutions in a programme of formal presentations and informal discussions, meetings with senior figures from national and regional Government, an occasional press conference and impromptu photo calls. Sir David King, accompanied by Peter Collett (British Ambassador, Brazil), moved energetically from one appointment to the next, avidly promoting UK abilities in science and innovation. Each meeting or event was succeeded by detailed scientific discussions to identify common interests and tangible opportunities.

At INPA (Insituto Nacional de Pesquisas de Amazonia) in Manaus we were introduced to a wealth of research on Amazonian biodiversity from micro-organisms to the Amazonian Manatee. Ensuing discussions involving the Government of Amazonas, Department of Environment and Sustainable Development generated the idea for an Amazonas Biological Records Centre based on the UK Biological Record Centre (a web-based facility collating 20 million records).

Also at Manaus we visited the Amazon Biotechnology Centre (CBA) which was created to promote the economic and sustained use of Amazonia biodiversity. Although government

sponsored, the CBA want industry to identify market opportunities and sponsor the collection of relevant source organisms, screening and identification of active molecules. Areas for collaboration with the UK emerged in discussions concerning technology transfer and genetic resource collections, the latter based around the UK's contributions to the OECD on standards for Biological Resource Centres. CBA also informed us that they are interested in attracting high calibre scientists to their Institute through their fellowship programme, which is open to UK researchers.

Our delegation travelled next to the political capital of Brazil, Brasilia. A meeting with the Minister of Agriculture and the President of EMBRAPA (Brazilian national agricultural research centre) included the formal signing of an MOU between EMBRAPA and Rothamsted and consideration of a Brazil supported collaboration with Norwich Research Park. The Brazilian Minister of Science and Technology then hosted the formal ceremony for the launch of the YoS from where we decamped to Sao Paulo for one last, very well attended presentation by Sir David, our delegation and Brazilian counterparts.

All too quickly, the week's work completed, it was time to say farewell to everyone and particularly to the FCO staff, who with their tireless professionalism and good humour, had made everything possible in a hectic schedule. We made one last sojourn through the traffic and the skyscrapers of cosmopolitan Sao Paulo to the airport and then home.