

Jerry Michael Melillo

Director, The Ecosystems Center, Marine Biological Laboratory
Professor of Biology, Brown University

June 28, 2007

House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations,
Human Rights, and Oversight

Science in the 21st century is often a co-operative activity that thrives on open international interactions. In my area of research, environmental science, widespread exchanges of ideas, data and analyses are critical to the scientific progress needed to address trans-boundary issues such as global climate change, ocean acidification, and the wholesale disruption of the global nitrogen cycle.

As noted in a recent editorial in *Science* (5 May, 2006, p. 657), “After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the federal government enacted new security policies, but it quickly became apparent that they would cause serious problems for international collaboration in science and education. The number of visa applicants subject to review under Visas Mantis, a program used since 1998 to provide extra scrutiny for visitors with backgrounds in certain sensitive areas of science and technology, grew” rapidly, ensnared many scholars and students in red tape, and created large backlogs of applications from established scholars and students seeking entry into the United States for legitimate scientific purposes - to share knowledge and to learn. While the true costs to society of diminished international scientific collaborations will never be known, the sense of many of us in science is that the costs are high.

Although there are clear signs that our government has recognized the importance of this problem and is taking measures to address it, the problem persists. In this testimony I will give two recent examples of the problem, one involving a distinguished non-government organization (NGO) and the other involving an intergovernmental organization of which the United States is a member by formal agreement.

Example 1: In February of 2006, the president of the International Council for Science (ICSU), an NGO created 75 years ago to facilitate the exchange of scientists and ensure that science contributes to a better world for all people, was denied a visa to make a scientific visit to the United States. The man involved in this unfortunate incident is Goverdhan Mehta, a professor of organic chemistry, a former director of the Indian Institute of Science, a leading center of research and graduate education in Bangalore, and a science adviser to the Indian prime minister.

Professor Mehta sought the visa in order to speak at an international scientific conference in the United States and to deliver lectures at the University of Florida, where he had been a distinguished visiting professor in 2001. But, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* “... he gave up after trying unsuccessfully to obtain a visa. On February 9 he traveled to an American consular office in Chennai (formerly Madras), one of only four U.S. consulates in India. There he waited for three hours to be questioned by a consular officer and was then told he would have to submit additional information before receiving a visa. “It was the most degrading experience of my life,” he told *The Indian Express*, a leading national daily newspaper.”” (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Today’s News,” February 24th, 2006).

The Mehta incident was widely covered in the world press and elicited a measured, but firm response from ICSU – “We do not expect that scientists be exempt from legitimate concerns relating to national security but we do believe that science has a key role to play in overcoming those concerns and propagating common understanding between countries. Non-discrimination and equity are the essential elements of the Principle of the Universality of Science, which is a founding principle of ICSU, to which all our Members, representing over one hundred countries and thousands of scientists across the world, are committed. Respect for this Principle and for individual scientists is, we believe, a normal expectation in any democratic society. The USA has always been a very strong supporter (and beneficiary) of ICSU and we hope that this will be demonstrated in the future not only in its policies but also its practices as regards the free exchange of scientists.”

(http://www.icsu.org/5_abouticsu/INTRO_UnivSci_3.html)

Example 2: The second example involves the Inter American Institute for Global Change Research (IAI), an intergovernmental organization supported by 19 countries in the Americas. The IAI is dedicated to pursuing the principles of scientific excellence, international cooperation, and the open exchange of scientific information to increase the understanding of global change phenomena and their socio-economic implications. The organization was born when sixteen nations in the Americas signed an International Agreement Establishing the IAI on May 13, 1992 in Montevideo, Uruguay. Since that time, three more nations have joined. The member countries are – Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, United States of America, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Because not all member countries have easy access to visas to enter the United States for scientific business, the governing body of the IAI, known as the Conference of the Parties (CoP), has decided not to hold any of its meetings in the United States until the visa acquisition is resolved. However, at a recent meeting (June, 2007) of the CoP in Manaus, Brazil, the Executive Committee (EC) of the CoP voted to hold their next EC meeting in Washington. This vote came after the United States made the offer to host the meeting and assured the CoP members that every effort would be made to expedite the visa acquisition process.

I will close by sharing with you a possible set of actions to resolve the visa problems associated with scientists’ visits to the United States on scientific business. In the *Science* editorial that I mentioned at the beginning of my testimony, a thoughtful path forward was suggested. “The scientific community needs to join with the Department of State to examine the fundamental assumptions that underlie current visa policies, especially as they apply to foreign scientists, engineers, and students. A joint working group could peel back the layers of policies and procedures to determine if, for example, the interviews and the Visas Mantis reviews are achieving their intended purpose; if a “trusted traveler” program would avoid subjecting frequent visitors to repetitive, irritating, and time-consuming screening; and if consular officers have the tools and training they need to do their jobs effectively. In short, the working group could help ensure that the benefits of the current system offset the monetary costs, damage to our nation’s reputation, and harm to our scientific and educational enterprise.” I firmly believe that our national security, the strength of our nation’s science and engineering efforts, and our international technological competitiveness depend on getting the visa system right and on finding comprehensive and enduring solutions to this problem.