Who won at Beijing 2008?

While the dust is settling over the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, an event considered to be the greatest ever organized, it is universally acknowledged that China won, by whatever measure one could bring in.

But the world of sports statistics is as 'dismal' a science as other disciplines like economics or scientometrics (as a recent editorial[1] in *Current Science* so eloquently expressed). A look at http://www.swivel.com/graphs/show/29404869 will confirm this. Sean Carmody (http://twitter.com/seancarmody) has meticulously dissected the results by medals tally, by weighted score, by GDP, by population, and so on. What intrigued me the most was his observation that 'the country with the most medals per capita is the Bahamas'. Naturally, I wanted to see who among the 87 countries that won medals at Beijing 2008, was at the bottom of the table. I have extracted this from the master table at Sean Carmody's website (http://www.swivel.com/data_sets/spreadsheet/1016460), and it is reproduced in Table 1.

Table 1. On a medals per million basis, the Bahamas won at Beijing (http://www.swivel.com/data_sets/spreadsheet/1016460 extracted on 30 August 2008)

Classification	Rank	Country	Population	Total no. of medals	Medals/ million
Top ten	1	Bahamas	307,451	2	6.5051
	2	Jamaica	2,804,332	11	3.9225
	3	Iceland	316,252	1	3.1620
	4	Slovenia	2,029,000	5	2.4643
	5	Australia	21,394,309	46	2.1501
	6	Cuba	11,268,000	24	2.1299
	7	New Zealand	4,274,800	9	2.1054
	8	Norway	4,778,500	10	2.0927
	9	Armenia	3,002,000	6	1.9987
	10	Belarus	9,690,000	19	1.9608
	37	Russian Federation	141,888,900	72	0.5074
	44	USA	304,917,000	110	0.3608
	68	China	1,325,637,000	100	0.0754
Bottom ten	78	Venezuela	27,953,701	1	0.0358
	79	Iran	70,495,782	2	0.0284
	80	Mexico	106,682,500	3	0.0281
	81	Nigeria	148,093,000	4	0.0270
	82	Sudan	38,560,000	1	0.0259
	83	Indonesia	231,627,000	5	0.0216
	84	South Africa	47,850,700	1	0.0209
	85	Egypt	75,219,000	1	0.0133
	86	Vietnam	87,375,000	1	0.0114
	87	India	1,136,961,000	3	0.0026

Surely, by this measure the Bahamas and Jamaica won the honours at Beijing. And among the 87 countries that made it to the table, India took the wooden spoon. On a per capita assessment, the Bahamas was 2500 times more effective than India in winning medals at Beijing.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2008, **95**, 431–432.

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CSIR–UGC NET life sciences exam: Need for a perceptional change

These are my reflections after reading the correspondence by K. Choudhary *et al.*[1].

A person qualifying CSIR–UGC NET life sciences exam should be an expert not only in modern frontiers of life sciences as the authors claim, but also in classical aspects like systematics, embryology, morphogenesis, anatomy, plant and animal diversity, etc. Without the knowledge of these fields, how can a researcher choose a particular experimental organism for his studies? Biotechnology alone is not the only purpose for which life sciences waited for years and there are no particular branches that can be deemed the acme of life sciences. There are so many basic scientific mysteries in plants and animals yet to be resolved, but not looked into seriously because of the craze for biotechnology. For the sake of scientific argument I accuse the so-called biotechnologists of being solely responsible for transforming field-oriented productive research into laboratory-oriented fuzzy research. Both field and laboratory-oriented experimentation are required for validating any hypothesis or concept. Will any of the so-called biotechnologists go on a survey of a hill or a plain, tracing the distribution and natural occurrence of the experimental system they work with? In order to avert these inconveniences, bacterial strains and yeast serve as the prime experimental systems in most of the laboratories. Another awkward observation made by the authors is that the failure to qualify in CSIR–UGC NET exam has led to a shortage of qualified teachers of biotechnology in colleges and universities. More than a life sciences researcher, a biotechnology teacher has to have a broad idea of life forms rather than restricting to forms which accept genetic manipulation or fermentation processes. Coming to their request for specialized biotechnology subject area in the NET exam, again I find the rationale weak for the above-mentioned rea-

sons. And finally for the betterment of biotechnology research and education in India, students who choose their career in any branch of life sciences should know about the classical aspects of the organisms they are going to work on. For this, the current syllabus of NET should be maintained or further expanded with classical aspects.

1. Choudhary, K., Singh, M., Rathore, M. S. and Shekhawat, N. S., *Curr. Sci.*, 2008, **95**, 295.

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No objection to apply for jobs

Several institutions and universities put a condition that the candidates applying for faculty or other positions should forward their applications through 'proper channel'. This may be fine for those in Government institutions or universities. However, for those in private institutions or organizations, this may be bothersome. This is because if they approach the management to forward their applications, either they would be asked to quit their existing jobs before applying for the new job. Even if one is well qualified to get the new job, he/she would not be in a position to resign/quit from his/her existing jobs beforehand. Under these circumstances my plea to all the organizations that seek new recruitments is to do away with the condition that the candidates have to apply through the proper channel.

Job seekers are also asked to get Gazetted Officer's signature in all the photocopies of certificates along with their application. This is another type of torture which should also be done away with so that applications could be sent hassle-free.

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Conservation of Painted Stork habitats in Andhra Pradesh

The Painted Stork, *Mycteria leucocephala* is a tropical bird species found in the South and South-East Asian region. There are an estimated 15,000 birds in South Asia and fewer than 10,000 in South-East Asia[1], with a declining trend in population. Although it is considered as one of the most numerous and secure of Asian storks, this is more a reflection on the rarity and endangerment of most storks in the region than the security of this species. The species is placed as 'Near Threatened' in the IUCN Red List Category 2007, because it is thought to be undergoing a moderately rapid population decline owing to hunting, habitat destruction, local trade and agricultural pollution[2]. It is a broad-winged soaring bird that flies with its neck outstretched. A few birds have been spotted on the banks of Akeru stream at Chintapalli village, Khammam district and Chinna Maduru village, Warangal District, Andhra Pradesh. They were found nesting on top of tamarind trees (*Tamarindus indica*) nearby the village pond and banks of the stream. According to the villagers, the birds come in January and leave by late June or July after the breeding season is over. Now their habitats are in danger due to human disturbances and hunting of adult species. Poachers kill the birds to be sold as meat in towns. As the tamarind trees on which the birds build their nests are being felled, they stray to the open fields and rooftops, which also make them an easy prey for poachers. Due to lack of suitable nesting trees, the breeding potential of the species is also affected. Other factors such as changes in prey species populations and in the ecological condition of habitats (pollution), and human disturbances have undoubtedly played a role in the declining species population in this area.

Protection of the species and conservation of their habitats is the need of the hour. For this, immediate steps need to be taken to enhance public awareness about the status of the threatened Painted Stork. Specific awareness programmes should be implemented targeting residents and resource users of villages where the birds reside. Artificial construction of ponds/tanks with trees on the banks is required for providing the birds a natural habitat. Complete and permanent protection should be ensured for all breeding congregations. Enough care must be taken not to destroy the foraging habitat of the species. The State Wildlife Department will have to review the status of existing population and take appropriate steps to conserve the remaining population.

1. Perennou, C., Mundkur, T. and Scott, D., *The Asian Waterfowl Census 1987–91: Distribution and Status of Asian Waterfowl*, Kuala Lumpur, 1994.
2. IUCN 2007, 2007 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species; www.iucnredlist.org, accessed on 21 July 2008.

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