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EUROCHAMP: Integration of European Simulation Chambers for Investigating Atmospheric Processes

To understand climate change and related problems such as atmospheric composition change, scientists need to study the chemistry of the atmosphere. One way to do this is through controlled experiments, by fitting analytical instruments to large boxes, cylinders or air balloons, so-called simulation chambers. Europe has more than 20 of these atmospheric test chambers. The EU-funded EUROCHAMP project aims to help European researchers make better use of them, working to improve existing experimental facilities and planning new ones.

● SCIENTIFIC ENLIGHTENMENT FROM THIN AIR

As climate change has moved high up the political agenda, the rarefied topic of atmospheric chemistry has taken on new urgency. The bulk constituents of air – oxygen and nitrogen – were central to the work of pioneering scientists including Priestley, Lavoisier and Cavendish. In the last few decades, however, the focus has been on scarcer gases that control acid rain, smog, and the effects of radiation from the sun. These include sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, carbon dioxide, water vapour, methane, ozone, fluorocarbons and volatile organic compounds (VOCs).

Atmospheric chemistry is a complex subject that draws on chemistry, physics, meteorology, computer modelling, oceanography, geology and volcanology. Like many other fields of natural science, it is studied in three main ways: by observing the natural world, by carrying out controlled experiments, and through mathematical simulation.

Controlled experiments are essential in helping to understand real-world observations and calibrate computer models. But how can a box of air accurately mimic what goes on in the vast atmosphere, especially the freezing temperatures and intense

radiation that characterise its upper regions? A particular problem is the tendency of gas molecules to stick to the walls of the box.

Given a big enough box, most of the molecules zooming around inside will rarely hit the walls, so experimental observations reflect fairly accurately the open conditions of the real atmosphere. Europe has more than 20 of these boxes, otherwise known as atmospheric reaction chambers, and many of them are certainly big. They range from cylinders and spheres of a few hundred litres in volume to a massive cube measuring more than six metres on each side.

The chambers fall into three basic types: outdoor and indoor photoreactors, plus 'dark chambers'. Photoreactors, illuminated by the sun or artificial ultraviolet lights, are especially important in the study of ozone and smog formation, while dark chambers reveal how atmospheric chemistry changes at night or during the polar winter. The EUROCHAMP project has brought together the most important atmospheric reaction chambers in Europe to create an integrated, international infrastructure.

● THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Of course, there is more to the average atmospheric reaction chamber than a box of air. The box itself is generally made of inert materials such as glass, stainless steel, Polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) or other fluorocarbon polymers. It may have lamps, temperature control, and vacuum pumps for simulating conditions above sea level. Most importantly, it typically has a large array of spectrometers, particle counters and other sensitive instruments.

EUROCHAMP aims to make better use of these expensive

facilities by breaking down boundaries between national research institutions and opening up access to a wider range of researchers. The project's three Networking Activities are aiding interdisciplinary collaboration both within and outside the existing community of atmospheric scientists. The Transnational Access facilities within EUROCHAMP help scientists of all backgrounds from all over Europe to use the experimental facilities, and provide the necessary training, support and funding.



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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A second goal of the project is to improve the performance of the existing facilities and create new ones if required. To achieve this, EUROCHAMP has two Joint Research Activities: the refinement

of analytical equipment, and the development of new chemical modelling techniques.

● INTEGRATION OF EUROPEAN SIMULATION CHAMBERS FOR INVESTIGATING ATMOSPHERIC PROCESSES IN SUMMARY

Project acronym: EUROCHAMP

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EU project officer: Anna-Maria Johansson

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Project webpage: www.eurochamp.org

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