

SAMPLES OF SKY CLUES IN PUZZLE

SCIENCE: Researchers from UCI lead a global gas hunt to probe the secrets of the Earth's atmosphere.

By **PAT BRENNAN**/The Orange County Register

The NASA research plane had been flying less than a week, and already something strange had turned up in the sultry air above the tropics.

A mysterious cloud of gas thousands of miles long hovered 20,000 feet over Tahiti, bearing the unmistakable signature of nature set ablaze: rainforests in South America, perhaps, or stubble and savanna in Africa or Australia.

Forty-four scientists were packed along with their machinery into the cramped confines of the DC-8, one of two research planes roaming the ocean of air above the South Pacific this past summer as part of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's \$1 billion Mission to Planet Earth — an investigation of humans' effect on our plan-



LEONARD ORTIZ/The Orange County Register

et's atmosphere that is now in its eighth year.

None expected to find this: a cloud of the chemical remnants of large-scale burning, in a place that was supposed to be a kind of final refuge — the one spot on the planet where the air was unpolluted.

Don Blake, an atmospheric scientist in charge of the University of California, Irvine's experiments

Please see **ATMOSPHERE** Page 10

SAMPLE 'SNAKE': UCI scientist Don Blake holds a set of 24 air-sample canisters called a 'snake.'