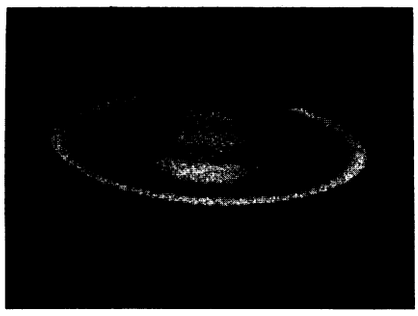

Meter-sized chunks of junk in rings.

Saturn's rings are unique in the solar system and have fascinated observers for centuries. In time past astronomers have thought the rings were the remains of a satellite that strayed too near the planet and was shattered by tidal forces. Lately the belief has grown that they are composed of fairly tenuous matter: ice crystals, dust or gas. So strong was this supposition that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration has been advised that they pose little or no hazard to future spacecraft.

The radar results disagree with this idea. They reveal solid chunks, a meter or more in diameter, and possibly much larger. They have to be closely packed, although not too closely since starlight can be seen shining through them. The rings "must be considered an extreme hazard to any spacecraft sent in or near the rings," warns Richard M. Goldstein, who did the observation with George A. Morris Jr.

In 1977 NASA plans to launch a space probe that will fly by Jupiter in 1979 and Saturn in 1981. The closest approach to Saturn will be about 207,000 kilometers. In spite of past advice about the rings, NASA has decided that the first approach to Saturn will be from a very safe distance. The rings extend to 140,000 kilometers from the planet. They are three in number and begin about 90,000 kilometers out. The width of the principal inner ring is estimated at 25,000 kilometers; the outer ring at 16,000.

Saturn itself reflected no radar signal. This could indicate that the planet has no solid surface or that its atmosphere absorbed the radar signal before the signal reached the surface.

The work was done in December and January with the 210-foot antenna at the Goldstone station on the Mojave Desert in California. Saturn was about 1.12 billion kilometers away. The signals took two and a half hours for the round trip.

"We received much stronger bounce-back signals than we expected from such a distance," says Goldstein. "The signals from the rings were five times stronger than Venus would be at that size and distance." □

PKU: New insights into cause and effects

Phenylketonuria (PKU) is the most common disorder of amino acid metabolism in man. Until a few years ago, a buildup of the amino acid phenylalanine in children with PKU triggered severe, irreversible brain damage. Now newborns are screened regularly for the disease. If they are found to have it, they are put on diets lacking in phenylalanine. This way, no phenylalanine can build up in their bodies and damage their brains.

Although PKU can now be prevented, scientists still have much to learn about its precise cause and effects. Investigators know, for example, that the cause of classical PKU is a deficiency in a particular liver enzyme, phenylalanine 4-hydroxylase. This enzyme is needed to break phenylalanine down, so that it can leave the body and not damage the brain. They have not been certain, however, whether the deficiency lies in an absence of enzyme or in some structural defect in the enzyme. In the February PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, Paul A. Friedman and his team of neurochemists at the National Institute of Mental Health report the first evidence which argues for a structural defect.

They took a sample of liver tissue from a patient with classical PKU and found that it contained a structurally altered phenylalanine 4-hydroxylase with small, but significant activity. They believe that the structurally altered enzyme probably results from a mutation in the gene coding for it. They have also found that deficient phenylalanine 4-hydroxylase activity has nothing to do with a deficiency in iron or in other chemicals that help the enzyme metabolize phenylalanine.

As for the effects of PKU—brain damage—R. L. Miller, R. A. Hawkins and R. L. Veech of St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington have found that the damage may result from the blocking of sugar-metabolizing enzymes in the brain by phenylalanine. They report their findings in the March 2 SCIENCE.

They injected phenylalanine, in concentrations comparable to that found in PKU patients, into the brains of newborn and adult rats. Thanks to a technique Veech had developed, they were able to remove and freeze the brains in half a second, so they could examine the effects of the phenylalanine injections on brain sugar-metabolizing enzymes. They found that pyruvate kinase, one of the crucial sugar-metabolizing enzymes, was blocked by phenylalanine in both newborn and adult rats. Other researchers have also found, in brain tissue rather than in live animal studies, that phenylalanine can block this enzyme.

The authors caution that enzyme blockage does not necessarily mean disruption of sugar metabolism and energy production. The brain may have other biochemical pathways around the blocked enzyme. Just last week, in fact, Hawkins and his co-workers found that the brains of adult rats do have such alternate routes. But he notes that the infant brain is known to contain only about 10 percent of the sugar-metabolizing enzymes found in the adult brain. So phenylalanine blockage of sugar-metabolizing enzymes might very well disrupt sugar metabolism in the young brain, but not in the adult brain. He and his colleagues now want to test this possibility in young rats.

The St. Elizabeths Hospital neurochemists are not sure whether a possible disruption in brain sugar metabolism might tie in with known damage in PKU victims of the myelin sheaths surrounding nerve fibers. Some other researchers recently reported that phenylalanine can inhibit the synthesis of myelin (fat). So it is quite feasible, Hawkins says, that phenylalanine might inhibit both sugar and fat metabolism in the brain. Either or both kinds of inhibition might cause brain damage. □

Nutrition briefs . . .

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has issued a cost-per-protein-equivalent guide to help shoppers overcome the skyrocketing cost of meat. A typical serving of roast rib of beef, the guide points out, costs three times as much as a serving of turkey providing the same amount of protein. And though bologna costs less than half the price per pound of rib roast, to get the same amount of protein, a much larger portion of bologna must be served, at a higher net price. For comparison purposes, the guide charts the cost of providing one-third the minimum daily requirement of protein (20 grams) by various meats or substitutes. A three-ounce serving of lean beef, lamb, pork, turkey or fish easily provides the 20 grams, but the cost varies from 20¢ for a three-ounce serving of hamburger to 59¢ for three ounces of rib roast (Aug. '72 prices). The cheapest way to eat 20 grams of protein is to cook up a cup of dried beans (6¢) or eat four and a half tablespoons of peanut butter (12¢). Eggs, chicken, some fish and beef liver were also listed as bargains. Among the most expensive items were 20-gram protein equivalents of bacon (10 slices 52¢), sausage (½ pound 45¢) and frankfurters (3½ for 33¢).

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Time was when U.S. standards of purity kept many imported food products off supermarket shelves. Now the

reverse is happening. Tokyo has just banned import or sale of Libby's tomato juice for containing over twice the legal standard for lead contamination. Libby says the 0.4 ppm Japanese limit "does not even allow for natural variation" of tomatoes on the vine. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government replies that the Libby cans have 0.79 to 1.1 ppm, enough, it says, to cause lead poisoning if a person drank several glasses a day over a period of months.

* * * *

The Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs is holding three days of hearings this week to determine the effect of TV commercials on children's diets. A "moderate" viewer will see 80,000 commercials by the time he is 16. A large percentage of these advertise nontraditional, snack-type foods—the same types now experiencing a nationwide burst of sales. Committee chairman George McGovern said recent surveys reveal "a disturbing decline in some very important parts of the traditional American diet." □

An 80-nation agreement on endangered species

Representatives from more than 80 nations climaxed almost three weeks of negotiations by signing a powerful document last weekend in Washington that will shelter imperiled species, as well as their hides and other products, from the voracity of international commerce.

The International Convention on Trade in Endangered Species of Wildlife, Animals and Plants will become effective, and binding on its members, when it has been ratified by 10 of its signatory countries. Under its umbrella will be 375 immediately endangered species and subspecies and 289 of imminent endangered status.

"We were determined," says Russell E. Train, head of the President's Council on Environmental Quality and also of the U.S. delegation to the convention, "that the convention also extend to wildlife species found on the seas and not belonging to any nation." A case in point is whales, on which a few major whaling nations including Japan and Russia had previously adopted only limited quota systems rather than the 10-year moratorium proposed by the United States (SN: 7/8/72, p. 23). Both Japan and Russia signed the new convention: in fact, the only major power not at the convention was the People's Republic of China.

Train pointed out, however, that the several months that will probably pass before the convention is ratified into effect will have to be a time of close watching. "During this period," he told the representatives at the signing, "all nations must be especially protective of their endangered wildlife. The appendices to this convention could, in the hands of unscrupulous persons, be used as a 'shopping list' of plants and animals." A grandfather clause in the convention exempts hides and goods taken before it comes into effect, so poachers and even lawful hunters about to be put out of lawful business may be working overtime. □

Islands in the stream: A gift from Agnes

Last summer's Hurricane Agnes was certainly at least 99 percent villain. However, it also left one apparently unprecedented windfall: a 500-acre fan of islands in northeastern Maryland's Susquehanna River.

In only two days, Agnes stirred up 50 million tons of sediment from a nearby reservoir, washed it over a dam and dumped it at the mouth of the river near the town of Havre de Grace—a century's work by ordinary processes. "This," says marine geologist J. R. Schubel of the Chesapeake Bay Institute at Johns Hopkins University, "is the only time anything like this has occurred in the Chesapeake Bay since man has been here."

Some area conservationists are excited about the chance that the new delta could help restore the Susquehanna's slipping position as a shelter for ducks, geese and other waterfowl. Pollution in the river has increased until it is smothering the submerged vegetation that attracts and feeds the birds, and the virgin islands could provide new wetlands for both flora and fowl.

Unfortunately, the same waters that deposited the cays may also erode them away. But there's a plan.

Environmental Concern is a fledgling (born in December) ecology organization that is working at Hambleton Island, a nearby established wetland, to find a way of planting the new islands with cordgrass and other marsh plants, both to attract the birds and to stabilize the sand.

Environmental Concern

Instant islands fan out across the Susquehanna—from Agnes with love.

A major problem, however, is the very birds for whom the islands are supposed to be a present. Last year, Environmental Concern, then an affiliate of the Nature Conservancy, planted more than 60,000 deep-rooting marsh-plant seedlings on a test beach to study wetlands preservation. Seven months later the man-made marsh was full-grown. Then, last winter, voracious hordes of ducks and geese raided the area and consumed all but about 20 percent of the young plants.

The problem on the new islands will thus be to keep the waterfowl away from the plants for a year or two so that the roots can get a foothold. The organization has been trying out scarecrows, floats, balloons and mirrors on Hambleton Island, none with overwhelming success. Last week members clipped some of the plants back as close to the ground as possible to see if reducing their visibility will help, and they may add blinking strobe lights.

Funding is another problem. A grant from Maryland will pay for two acres of planting on the new cays, and Environmental Concern is only aiming hopefully for 10. Also, the islands slope so gradually that the 500 acres shrink to about an acre at high tide, which means that planting probably has to be done by hand, since any heavy machinery that breaks down could be swept away.

Without planting, the islands could be eroded away in a few years. The ducks are waiting.