

OF THE WEEK

history of antarctic ice cap	204
drilling antarctica's valleys	205
glaciation in north carolina	205
warm superconductivity	206
official earthquake prediction	206
agreement on seals	206
drug commission's report	207
u.s.-soviet science accords	207
mars and venus missions	208
earth-moon theory	208
interferon and colds	208

NOTES

environment	209
earth sciences	209
medical sciences	210
behavioral	210
aerospace	213
physical sciences	213

ARTICLES

does antimatter matter?	211
earthwatch from orbit	214

DEPARTMENTS

books	202
letters	203

COVER: Geologically complex and quake-prone area of lower Greece photographed by the Earth Resources Technology Satellite (ERTS). Many folds or faults are visible at left. Athens is at extreme upper right. Insets: Color-enhancing machine and data-handling consoles for ERTS. Scientists say the photos from ERTS exceed their most optimistic predictions. See p. 214. (Photos: NASA)

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to the editor

Fertilization and life

The otherwise excellent article "Test-tube babies in the making" (SN: 2/24/73 p. 124) repeats statements that reproductive biologists are trying to make, achieve or create life. Fertilization and other mechanisms of reproduction being studied transmit life; they do not create it.

Through time and changes, life has perpetuated itself through structures that reproduce. From that perspective we see that there is something backward in the common idea that each individual has a life entirely his own and unrelated to the life of his germ cells, children, parents, fellow men and fellow species. Today, concern for all of life requires protecting its quality especially against a detrimental quantity of human individuals. Success in that adaptation for survival could depend on reproduction policy shaped scientifically by considerations of cause and effect rather than by sectarian moral assertions extrapolated from myths that life and humanness originate at fertilization and that, therefore, there is some fundamental difference in lethality between contraception and abortion, capital punishment, war or letting death rates rise by cutting funds for medical research and care.

*Bent G. Boving, M.D.
Prof. Gyn-Ob/Anatomy
Wayne State University
School of Medicine
Detroit, Mich.*

Dismal Swamp's 'Firebird'

Your excellent account of the Dismal Swamp (SN: 3/3/73, p. 132) carries a picture of Lake Drummond with the caption "created, according to Indian Legend, by the 'Firebird'—possibly a meteor." "Meteorite" must have been meant—a meteor is an atmospheric phenomenon.

Actually, the lake shows no evidence of impact and is only roughly circular. A meteorite capable of creating a 2½-mile crater would probably have wiped out any Indians who could have connected the lake with it. Dr. Robert E. Jenkins, Vice President-Science, of the Nature Conservancy, writes that it could have been caused by a fire which spread through

the peat from a central origin. Isn't it likely that the "Firebird" was a lightning bolt which started the fire?

*Brandon Barringer
President*

*The Barringer Crater Company
Philadelphia, Pa.*

Abortion as contraception

I read with interest the letter on abortion and contraception from Ms. Anita Murray, New York Chapter of the National Organization of Women (SN: 3/3/73, p. 131). I certainly do not claim to be expert in this field, but it seems to me that a woman using no contraception, and availing herself to the menstrual extraction technique described by Ms. Murray, could possibly become pregnant once every 28 days rather than "once a year." Surely there must be safer, or at least more pleasing, means of birth control than a monthly visit to your friendly local vacuum pump.

*T. L. Smith
Cary, N.C.*

Ms. Anita Murray's implication that abortion is as safe as the pill and that abortion by menstrual extraction by suction is probably safer than either the pill or the IUD is erroneous and misleading. If a woman used no contraception at all and enjoys "normal" sex, I think she will need more than one abortion a year. Even if she needed only two abortions in a year, her chances of mortality will be double the risk if she used the pill.

I support the view that abortion must not be illegal when the woman and her physician agree that an abortion is indicated. This view is pragmatic. But, it is a disservice to women to suggest that abortions are safer than contraception. To repeat a well worn adage, prevention is indeed better than cure.

*A. S. Padma Raju, M.D.
Ft. Meade, S. Dak.*

(We received several other letters making the same point.—Ed.)

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203