

Science[®] News

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Incorporating Science News Letter

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COVER: Probing over, under, around and through great pillars of cloud in the tropics this summer, a vast international research team will seek to understand the heat-transfer processes that fundamentally affect the world's weather. See p. 354. (Illustration: NOAA)

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June 1, 1974

To the Editor

Slavery and the computer

Your article "Slavery: The Good Old Days?" (SN: 5/11/74, p. 303) should develop some wry comments below the Mason-Dixon line. You will recall that when the computer was first used to predict a presidential election, the professionals scoffed and "took out some of its brains." Yet the election was as predicted. It is very human of the authors of *Time on the Cross* also to deny the results of their brain child. But the very frenzy of individuals always obscures the average performance, and the computer is probably more than half right on the inputs furnished. A computer has no moral sense—as the shocked authors have found out. So, what is truth?

Butler King Couper
Tryon, N.C.

Science and babies' awareness

I applaud Mrs. Burger's and Mrs. Carter's awareness that their babies observed their environment (SN: 5/11/74, p. 299). I wish, however, that they had more carefully read the article (SN: 4/6/74, p. 222) they criticized. Furthermore, their ignorance as to what scientists are up to is appalling. It is one thing to know qualitatively, as these mothers do, that babies are aware. It's quite something else to discover exactly what babies are aware of. Yet Genevieve Carpenter was reporting on two-week-old girls' ability to distinguish between and to recognize female faces and voices; she was *not* just saying that babies are aware.

The more exact knowledge is needed to help predict children's development and to solve developmental problems when they arise. Quantitative and precise data are fundamental to understanding in all areas, including human development. Denying the need for knowing specifics reveals plain ignorance of the aims and objectives of science.

Mrs. Alida Westman, Ph.D.
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Sheep, coyotes and rabbits

Reading the recent article on coyote control (SN: 5/11/74, p. 311), I was surprised to hear that the lithium treatment might also be used to protect rabbits as well as livestock. Surely, this is a mistake when one observes the close relationship between coyotes and the much larger rabbit population that is contained by these canine predators.

Training the coyotes to dislike rabbit meat might cause them to prey on another species that occupies an entirely different ecological niche with other animals. Competition would increase to such an extent that other species would be "pushed out." It would be difficult for these species to "niche-split" with an animal like the coyote on such short notice, and so, a chain reaction would soon begin.

All this is exclusive of the fact that turning the coyotes away from the rabbits

would result in uncontrollable numbers of our bushy-tailed friends, a nightmare in itself.

For these reasons, I advocate the use of careful and foresighted thinking on the part of those who might attempt to implement such a program of wildlife control.

Jerry Liebelson
Spring Valley, N.Y.

Finagle Factor

Professional engineers and physicists have indeed found an *Urprinzip* for bridging the gap between the firm, clear certainties of the textbook and the elusive variables of real life (SN: "Off the Beat," 5/11/74, p. 308). They use the Finagle Factor. This is the factor by which one multiplies experimental results to make them agree with theory.

Greta Stromberg
Key West, Fla.

(It is said by many physicists, in fact, that the Finagle Factor is but an offshoot of Finagle's Law, a dictum at least as ur as those of Murphy et al, to wit: The perversity of the universe tends toward a maximum.—Ed.)

Unscientific feminism

Regarding the letters to the editor in the Feb. 4 issue on the article "Baby-making: Dress them in blue" (SN: 1/12/74, p. 20).

I am extremely disappointed by the response from the female "scientist." I must say her response was a very unscientific feminist response which is unfair to the SCIENCE NEWS staff. I am really tired of these women libbers who are looking for a male chauvinist behind every statement.

I would like at this time to compliment the SCIENCE NEWS staff on the quality and objectivity of its articles.

James G. Stan
San Jose, Calif.

Biophenomena

I am part of a group doing research on Kirlian photography, acupuncture, bioenergetics, and possible relationships between these phenomena. I invite others working in these areas to write to me for a mutual exchange of ideas and information.

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Credit on comets

The information and quotations on the history of some earlier comets presented in the first column of our recent article on the comet Kohoutek (SN: 5/4/74, p. 290) were from an article by Luigi Jaccchia in the April SKY AND TELESCOPE. We inadvertently omitted that credit information.—Editor

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