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Incorporating Science News Letter

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COVER: The cones in the dodecahedron are models of 12 laser beams converging on a tiny target pellet. It's the basic geometry of Lawrence Livermore Laboratory's next major laser-fusion experiment. See p. 106. (Photo: LLL)

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August 17, 1974

To the Editor

Food from petroleum

It seems to me that what the United States should advocate with respect to future food supplies to alleviate famine (SN: 5/11/74, p. 306) is to propose, as a supplement to stockpiling food, the development of technology to convert petroleum directly into food without the necessity of going through the intermediate steps of planting seeds, fertilizing, reaping, etc. The total amount of food energy needed to sustain the world population is not much more than 10 percent of the total petroleum production. Conversion of, say, 5 percent of this (i.e. 0.5 percent of the world petroleum production) into food directly would constitute a valuable energetically sensible way of providing for the alleviation of famine. (Present production of food consumes almost as much energy in the form of petroleum as it produces as food.)

While additional research and development would be required for the total synthesis of food, technology is already available for producing protein and fats directly from petroleum. The total amount of plant capacity needed would be no larger than is found in many individual modern oil refineries. If in any year the synthetic food was not needed plants could shut down in a standby condition until they were again needed, at much lower cost than storing surplus food. The whole operation could be under the aegis of the U.N. and could be paid for by those nations that profit most from the production and utilization of petroleum.

*Alan C. Nixon
Past President
American Chemical Society
Berkeley, Calif.*

Your report on recent findings that tree bark may be used to remove polluting cations from water (SN: 6/22/74, p. 403) reminds one of an earlier similar use of tree bark, as a sorber or ion exchange material, presumably.

In Exodus XV 22-25 it is related that in Sinai shortly after leaving Egypt ". . . they went three days in the desert and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah for they were bitter: Therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying what shall we drink? And he cried to the Lord; and the Lord showed him

a tree, and he cast it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet." *Plus ça change . . .*

*J. O. N. Hinckley
Research Associate
University of Arizona
Tucson, Ariz.*

A beautiful job

I am delighted with the job that Dietrick Thomsen did in his article "Phototherapy: Treatment with Light" (SN: 6/22/74, p. 404), not only in that it is clear and well written, but also because it is the first time I have ever been quoted correctly and in context. Congratulations on a beautiful job.

*Dr. Thomas P. Vogl
Assembly of Life Sciences
National Research Council
Washington, D.C.*

Journal references

I am getting very disturbed with your news articles which cite various articles and/or authors without giving a complete reference so that interested readers can follow up. If you could urge your staff to be more responsible in this area, it would be appreciated.

*Tom P. Abeles
Assistant Professor of
Environmental Control
University of Wisconsin
Green Bay, Wisc.*

(We think we do pretty well in that regard. Our policy is to give a journal reference with all articles for which a scientific paper served as a source of information. Sometimes we even give the reference when we develop the story from our own sources but know that the results are to be published in a journal. Much of our news coverage is based on our news staff's own reporting. When no reference is given, the best route to further information is to call or write the scientists involved, whose affiliations we try conscientiously to list. If the complaint is with the completeness, not the frequency, of references, we provide the issue date of a journal, believing as a weekly newsmagazine that this is more informative to most readers than merely volume and issue number—Ed.)

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