SCIENCE NEWS®
A Science Service Publication
Volume 118/September 27, 1980/No. 13

THIS WEEK

RESEARCH NOTES

ARTICLES

DEPARTMENTS

COVER: The largest finite simple group in mathematics may be a monster—it contains the possible rotations of a geometric figure with more than 100,000 dimensions, but it solved a monstrous problem, too. Its discovery tied up the loose ends in the classification scheme for the basic elements of group theory. See p. 204. (Illustration: John Ellis and John Handwork)

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231 West Center Street
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Subscription rate: 1 yr., $19.50; 2 yrs., $34.00; 3 yrs., $47.50 (Add $3 a year for Canada and Mexico, $4 for all other countries.) Change of address: Four to six weeks' notice is required. Please state exactly how magazine is to be addressed. Include zip code. For new subscriptions only call: (1) 800-247-2160.

Printed in U.S.A. Second class postage paid at Washington, D.C. Title registered as trademark U.S. and Canadian Patent Offices.

Published every Saturday by SCIENCE SERVICE, Inc. 1719 N St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. (202-785-2255)

LETTERS

The Planetary Society

I read with interest your article about The Viking Fund (SN: 8/16/80, p. 100). Stan Kent and his associates who organized the fund deserve a great deal of congratulations, both for a positive accomplishment as well as demonstrating the breadth of public interest in planetary exploration.

I would like to call your attention to The Planetary Society, a new organization initiated by Carl Sagan and Bruce Murray but with many non-scientific colleagues and advisors, to encourage and be a focus for this public interest. We support The Viking Fund and other organizations and already have liaison efforts with them underway. However, we will be an organization which will, by its very existence and breadth, demonstrate the public interest in the exploration of our solar system and the search for extraterrestrial life and therefore encourage a realistic, continuing and vital program by the government of such exploration.

The chance to help bring about—and participate in — the quest for other worlds and for extraterrestrial life is the central benefit of Society membership. Members will have many opportunities to make their opinions known, as part of a group that will actively encourage a renewed commitment to planetary exploration and support efforts in search of answers to the fundamental questions of human origins and destiny. Immediate activities and member benefits include *The Planetary Report,* a lively, colorful magazine/newsletter which includes the latest pictures and analysis from the exploration program, lectures, conferences and symposia, opportunities to obtain planetary pictures and maps and, as the Society progresses, opportunities to initiate or enable selected research activities. Several events are now being organized in connection with the Voyager encounters with Saturn.

The Viking Fund, other efforts by such groups as the World Space Foundation and their solar sail project, the growing number of pro-space grassroots organizations as noted in your article, the burgeoning popularity of science and science fiction themes related to space exploration, all testify to the genuine and broad popularity that such enterprises have. The positive response to our own initial organizing efforts and the first wave of memberships we have received give us great optimism that our premise about the popular interest was well founded. Interested readers may join The Planetary Society or obtain additional information from myself at P.O. Box 3599, Pasadena, Calif., 91103. Membership (tax deductible) is $20 per year.

Louis Friedman
The Planetary Society
Pasadena, Calif.

Fire ant remedy

Just wanted to say a word about killing fire ants (SN: 8/30/80, p. 133).

Back in 1951 an Agricultural Extension Agent using a sharpened broomstick, a sheet of newspaper, KCN and a long-handled shovel, in three minutes, wiped out five of those ant nests, so common in Colorado, that resemble fire ant nests.

The procedure was simplicity — shove the point of the broomstick as far down into the colony as it would go. Immediately pour a tablespoon of KCN in the hole, slap down a double sheet of newspaper and cover the paper with dirt. It worked so fast that no ants got out of the nest. The farmers didn't like it as it wasn't dramatic enough — no dead lying around to gloat over.

William A. Schwab
Glendora, Mich.

P.S. I've read SCIENCE NEWS for many years now and would not be able to come near keeping current without it.

Radiation clarification

The accuracy of SCIENCE NEWS items in my field is generally excellent, but I believe your item on natural radiation (SN: 8/23/80, p. 118) is misleading. The news item states that "the average annual dose absorbed from external radiation [in China] was 196 millirads for basin inhabitants and 72 millirads for the control area." Later on in the same paragraph it stated that "in the United States, average annual exposure ranges from 23 mrems... to 90 mrems...." The source of this average annual exposure is not specified, but the implication is that it is external radiation and, therefore, U.S. levels are well below Chinese levels.

In fact the U.S. figures quoted in your news item refer only to external radiation from terrestrial sources, i.e., radioactivity in air, soil and water. The total average annual dose in the United States from external radiation, including cosmic rays, varies from approximately 55 mrem to approximately 170 mrem. These values are comparable to the Chinese data.

E. H. Crosby
Sayre, Penn.

Corrections: The picture of bubble formation in gelatin accompanying "A Bubble Is Born" (SN: 9/20/80, p. 187) was printed upside down. The chemical structures illustrating the article "Chemical Fruits of the Desert" (SN: 9/20/80, p. 189) are correctly labeled below.