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## Letters

### Pass the alga seltzer?

Re "Diet for a Blue Planet" (SN: 4/6/85, p. 220)  
I would like to report the following on the gas-  
tronomical consumption of algae.

Some 20 years ago, it had been suggested that  
algae would be ideal for food in space projects,  
besides the fact of their ability to create O<sub>2</sub> from  
CO<sub>2</sub>. It was not long before reports were coming  
in of rather severe disturbances such as abdomi-  
nal cramps, diarrhea and bloating occurring in  
humans within three to four days. Further re-  
search by the undersigned revealed that a cer-  
tain variety of algae, under conditions of radia-  
tion, might cause mutations that instead of ex-  
creting O<sub>2</sub> might produce deadly CO.

It so happens that *Anacystis nidulans* algae  
notoriously do just that. (We have a rough anal-  
ogy of the beneficial and lethal types in the  
mushroom family.) Fortunately, since those  
early years the cultivation of algae in reference

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#### 282 Climate and Africa: Why the Land Goes Dry

Cover: False-color image from a meteorological satellite shows drought-stricken regions in Africa last August. Tan and brown areas contain almost no vegetation; red and purple depict well-vegetated zones. Through the use of such satellite and computer technology, scientists are scouting for clues to the cause and persistence of Africa's 17-year dry spell. (Photos: Advanced Very High Resolution Radiometer/NOAA; World Bank/Yosef Hadar)



### Departments

#### 275 Letters

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to space flight has apparently been dropped.  
Science marches on.

Constantine Generales  
New York, N.Y.

#### Asbestos from autos

In "Asbestos in babies" (SN: 3/9/85, p. 153)  
you report findings suggesting insulation or  
gaskets as possible sources of asbestos in de-  
posits within lungs of infants. The article con-  
tinues with information that autopsies on most  
adults have shown pulmonary asbestos depos-  
its, with no suggestion of their origin.

I would be very surprised if this seems to be a  
mystery, especially to anyone familiar with the  
composition of automobile brake and clutch  
linings, in which well over hundreds of  
thousands of pounds of asbestos are daily being  
ground to a fine dust for dissemination into the

air. I am curious to know whether this has been  
previously studied for its effects on some lung  
disorders. It is certainly a greater source than  
gaskets, which are normally pressure sealed be-  
tween solid metallic or plastic material, even in  
an incubator.

Willard G. Kanagy  
Lafayette, La.

#### Africa's crisis: Ascribing blame

In your Letters section (SN: 3/30/85, p. 195)  
Joseph Busey ascribes much of the drought in  
Ethiopia to "centralized, Marxist/socialist re-  
gimes," while William Holmes charges it to the  
"collectivization of farming, aggravated by the  
import of free food."

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I would regard a nation (including our own) that feeds its hungry as worthy of commendation, not condemnation. Furthermore, how do Busey and Holmes account for the drought in 20 other African nations, nonsocialist, two of them (Sudan and wealthy Zaire) among our foremost allies? It seems odd to blame a government for a natural disaster, but then, as always, *delenda Marxism*, valid or not.

Leonard T. Boyer  
Flushing, N.Y.

### On suicide and natural selection

Drs. Salk and Lipsitt are to be applauded for publicly concluding (albeit indirectly) that humans are subject to the same selective pressures that invigorate other species in the absence of tampering ("Birth trauma linked to adolescent suicide." SN: 3/23/85, p. 183). It may be unpleasant to realize but it is no less true that elimination of maladapted people strengthens the surviving gene pool. Nature upgrades by producing variations and weeding out those that falter, especially during reproduction. Enlightened laypersons understand the herdsman's explanation of rigorous culling of animals that experience difficulty bearing or rearing young: "I may ship some good cows but I can't afford to keep any bad ones."

Thus one may, as an academic pursuit, seek causal relationships between "birth trauma" and ultimate success of a particular gene line.

But surely there is nothing "strange" (Salk's word) about the consequence of reproductive dysfunction. Strange it is when clinicians articulate the adaptive value of death and question the wisdom of its postponement through medical intervention. And the conditions cited are benign compared with the genetic burden imposed by a host of insidious syndromes human society has lately retained in its breeding population. Lipsitt's concluding remarks are profound, courageous and a breath of fresh air. Would that they be heeded.

Gil Dryden  
Slippery Rock, Pa.

For decades researchers have been finding that poverty, perinatal stress and constitutional predisposition strongly dispose individuals to mental illness, criminality, systemic disease, violence or other morbidity. It is not surprising that suicide should prove to be a function of perinatal near-death.

What is surprising is that at least two respectable health scientists should mutter that old cliché of horror movies, "Nature has been violated." Any of us who have benefited from antibiotics, modern hygiene, postindustrial distribution of food or other "miracles" of science have benefited from a violation of nature. Isn't it time respectable men of science cried "shame" whenever this teleological absurdity is pronounced? Perhaps we should invite our colleagues to live, with their children, in some

third-world nation where nature reigns undisturbed.

George von Hilsheimer  
Maitland, Fla.

What Lipsitt says about late prenatal care indicating unwanted pregnancy sounds reasonable at first; but I think low income and/or an unfriendly feeling toward some doctors has more to do with it these days. I saw doctors very late in both of my pregnancies because I was well read, well educated and knew my own body better than anyone else. In my reading and listening to reports of Lipsitt's findings I didn't hear these possibilities taken into account.

Karen Jackson  
Jaffrey, N.H.

### Scapegoat for stress

I question the "mild but nagging stress reaction" results with regard to the Three Mile Island-2 accident ("Chronic stress still lingers near TMI," SN: 4/6/85, p. 214). How does one choose a "baseline stress," then attribute additional stress to an accident that caused no casualties?

I envision TMI as a scapegoat for everyday stress and a field day for lawyers exploiting such conclusions. There may in fact be a beneficial stress relief in blaming TMI for everyday woes, instead of our neighbors.

J. Flack  
Burke, Va.