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This Week

Research Notes

Articles

Cover: The Terregator, shown here in a coal mine, is one of several recently designed robots that are "learning" how to survive and function in the unpredictable, hazardous environment of nuclear power plants, construction sites and underground mines. Such robots may eventually do jobs that are too dangerous for human workers. (Photo: Mary Jo Dowling/CMU)

Departments

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Letters

The world according to Calhoun

John B. Calhoun holds that the behavior of the mice in his experiment "can provide insight into the human condition" ("Population Overload: Mice Advice," SN:5/31/86,p.346).

What of the mice in the adjoining cage? The underpopulated cage? The cage to which his mice have the option of moving?

There isn't any? There should be.

Calhoun works in Bethesda, Md., a suburb in the Boston-Washington megalopolis. He has the option to move himself and his family to a rural area anywhere on this continent or in Australia, South America or Africa any time he wishes. So do the rest of you.

Calhoun's dire warnings may be true, but they will be so when all of the planet has the population density required by his model. That has not happened yet.

Georgianna Henry
Duluth, Minn.

Sociological experiments performed on mice are not the best predictors for human behavior. A human being's social world is far more complex than is that of a mouse. Humans have an economic structure, governmental bodies, due processes and social infrastructures to meet human needs.

But more to the point, consider the human being's resourcefulness. Overpopulation (itself a weighted word) carries its own set of challenges, but *people* solve problems. It is the human mind that has built the better mousetrap.

I like New York, I love Chicago. I'd rather be around people any day. The more the merrier – and the better off we all are – in my view.

Paul Obis
Oak Park, Ill.

Although agreeing with Calhoun's findings that overcrowding can lead to social pathology and population collapse, I wonder how he is able to ascertain the optimum human population.

If we agree, as he indicates, that world population reached twice the optimal level in 1975, then the optimum must have been attained around 1930, at about 2 billion. Headlines of that period document the winding down of Prohibition, the settling in of the Great Depression, Europe slipping toward World War II and poverty and unrest in what we now call the Third World. If 1930 was the best of times, I am not eager to experience the worst.

Robert E. Adler
Psychologist
Santa Rosa, Calif.

Could inbreeding result in any of the observed behavioral effects in the crowded mice? Would an equal number of unrelated wild mice in the colony behave similarly?

I. Scott
Columbus, Ohio

According to Calhoun, the experimental colony consisted of two crossed strains of mice in which some inbreeding inevitably took place. But he says the behavior of inbred laboratory rats and mice in prior studies did not deviate significantly from the behavior of wild counterparts, and adds that inbreeding probably had no marked effects on the mice in his latest project. – B. Bower