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## Letters

### Ho-hum research

In "Wondering why we're pawns to yawns" (SN: 12/3/88, p.366) Robert R. Provine is quoted as saying "virtually anything having to do with a yawn can trigger yawning."

Here is one field report that he may be really onto something. I was alone while reading the article, about midmorning — my best time of day — and I yawned three times during the minute or less it took to complete the article.

Lots of articles in SCIENCE NEWS make sense and are important; rarely does one have such an immediate impact.

Brent R. Jackson  
Boston, Mass.

Robert R. Provine has attempted to discover which visual portion of a yawning face induces the contagious effect. When I began reading the article, my first thought was that the cause is the very *idea* of yawning. (Naturally I yawned upon concluding the article.)

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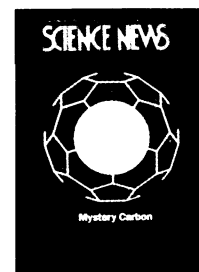
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### Articles

- 56 Tracking an Elusive Carbon

Cover: Scientists are tracking down a 60-carbon spherical molecule called buckminsterfullerene. This and other "fullerenes" may be the unseen characters directing events in a number of long-standing galactic mysteries. Here, the molecule is shown surrounding an ion. (Image: Courtesy Richard E. Smalley)



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To complete the testing, Provine might try using other stimuli, such as an audio tape with sounds people usually make when yawning, or stories about yawning which the test subjects may read or have read to them. Finally, it would be interesting to learn if the contagious effect is exhibited across species. For example, will a film of yawning dogs or cats induce yawning in humans, or vice versa?

Keith Robertson  
Charlottesville, Va.

### Evidence or opinion?

"Plants Poised at Extinction's Edge" (SN: 12/10/88, p.372) does not report on any actual scientific evidence of plant extinction, but rather on the results of a *poll* of botanists. This approach is akin to the "nine out of 10 doctors recommend" advertisements, and is of as little evidentiary relevance as a statement like "nine out of 10 astrologers assert the moon is made of cheese." If we were to

scientifically consider the latter hypothesis, we would need relevant facts, such as studies correlating the spectra of moonbeams with curds and whey. Similarly, for readers evaluating these potential extinctions, where are the population statistics, the ecological models, the field studies to back it up? On what basis did the botanists come to these conclusions? Surely the readers of SCIENCE NEWS could handle a little more technical background, and deserve *some* data amidst the opinions.

Marc Le Brun  
Thousand Oaks, Calif

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