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Letters

Unthinking animals

Isn't it about time scientists stopped assigning motivations, attitudes and needs to the unthinking natural activities of plants and animals? It is impossible for Shirley C. Strum ("Sex and friendship among baboons," SN: 4/22/89, p.251) to scientifically assert, let alone know, that one reason for diminished reproductive returns among baboons living in a troop for more than five years is that they "may serve to discourage [my emphasis] inbreeding." Clearly, this only results in less inbreeding, nothing more.

Irwin Taylor
Scarsdale, N.Y.

Scientists indeed disagree on the interpretation of monkey and ape behavior, but I cannot think of one who argues that these animals engage in "unthinking natural activities" comparable to those of plants.

— B. Bower

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Cover: Growing evidence from North America suggests that most of Earth's continents joined together about 1.6 billion years ago and then broke apart 300 million years later. Northwest Canada's Mackenzie basalt dike swarm, shown here, may be a relic of the supercontinent's death. The dikes, or vertical sheets, formed 1.27 billion years ago when molten basalt rose to fill fractures in the stretching crust. Spreading out like a fan, the dikes extend 2,000 kilometers across Canada, in some places creating durable walls that tower as high as 30 meters over more easily eroded rock. White features in lower right are cascades connecting neighboring lakes. (Photo: Robert S. Hildebrand, Geological Survey of Canada)



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Primitive or privileged?

"A World That Never Existed" (SN: 4/29/89, p.264) suggests a theory I have long held: Hunter-gatherer lifestyle is just that — a lifestyle, based on choice and opportunity. To think of hunter-gatherers as "primitive," as many anthropologists apparently do, is incredibly ethnocentric, implying that our tied-to-the-timeclock, earning-based lifestyle is somehow superior to their spending "a few hours a day" providing for their needs.

Mark A. Pearson
Psychologist
Chester Mental Health Center
Chester, Ill.

Bruce Bower quotes Robert J. Gordon as noting "that the term 'Bushman,' derived from the Dutch 'Bossiesman,' means 'bandit.'"

"Bossiesman" is Afrikaans, not Dutch. In Dutch the word would be "Bosjesman." In both cases the diminutive plurals "jes" and "ies" indicate the same: "man of the small bushes," not "bandit."

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