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Letters

Too much of a bad thing?

In "Faulting the numbers" (SN: 8/24/91, p.127), you report that a panel of the National Research Council is concerned that "federal policymakers routinely make major decisions concerning changes in social and tax programs on the basis of 'numbers' spewed out by complex computer models, which are designed to estimate the effects of such changes on expenditures, revenues and human behavior." The panel's report warns that these estimates are generally of unknown quality and may be seriously flawed. As a solution, the panel recommends that the government allocate sufficient resources to improve the quality of current computer models used for making cost estimates.

It is difficult for me to understand how intelligent people can come up with an idea that amounts to "more of a bad thing is better."

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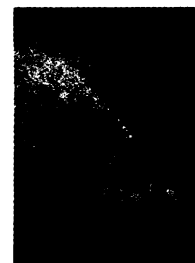
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Cover: Tracking down eels and their young in the open ocean is a bit like chasing rainbows. This past summer, a Japanese research ship set out on a quest to determine where Japanese eels spawn in the vast Pacific. A giant rainbow was just one of the rewards the researchers reaped for their efforts. (Photo: Michael J. Miller/University of Maine, Orono)



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The problem is not, as the panel states, "poor quality of the available data and the lack of objective measures for assessing a given computer model's reliability and validity." Economics is guided by all knowledge. For a very enlightening look at the resistance of economics to planning and prediction, one should read *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, published in 1988 by F.A. Hayek, who received the 1974 Nobel Prize in Economics.

Hayek explains that the extended order of economics has come to exist through an information-gathering process, calling up and putting to use "widely dispersed information that no central planning agency, let alone any individual, could know as a whole, possess or control." As Hayek states, "Man's knowledge . . . is dispersed." Putting more federal dollars into computer models would be comparable to pouring water into the ocean.

Hayek would caution this panel that the "fatal conceit" is the idea that man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes.

Debbie Alexander
Bloomington, Minn.

Open-and-shut case

I cannot understand the rationale of the study described in "Aloe vera: Healing or hurting?" (SN: 8/24/91, p.125).

Aloe vera heals burns by excluding air and keeping the area in a gel-like moisture. It stands to reason that this is not the procedure required to heal surgical incisions or cuts, since these depend upon air for optimum healing. Moreover, aloe vera has never been specific for infections.

Freda Meredith
Dixmont, Maine

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