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Cover: To a casual observer, the roiling plumes of dense, black smoke created by burning oil may look like an environmental nightmare. But data from new studies — like this one conducted in the North Atlantic — suggest that for certain spills at sea, fires may prove the preferred solution for cleaning up oil. (Photo: NOBE)



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**Science Service**, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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## Letters

### Answers to corny queries crop up

I have to chuckle when I think of the controversy raised in the letters about natural propagation of corn ("Giving ear to corny queries," SN: 7/17/93, p.35). I wish that "human intervention" really was necessary to harvest the corn in my garden. But for the past several years we have been unable to "intervene" before the raccoons and squirrels found and devoured all of the ears just before our own date for its demise.

Some of us here in the corn belt resort to repellents applied to the husks and silks just to be able to enjoy the corn we corn lovers are trying to propagate. We have even tried hot pepper sauce in addition to the standard garden fence!

Perhaps it is not a genetic loss in the corn plant itself, but our ability to control animal species around our fields that has produced the (potential) propagation problem for corn.

Brian Harmon  
Downers Grove, Ill.

In answer to Roger M. Wernicke's query concerning the persistence of corn pollen in archaeological sites, J.A. Raloff states, "The sites where such apparently old pollen is found are very dry." This may be true of some sites, such as those in New Mexico, but the Koster site in southern Illinois and many sites in lowland Mesoamerica are in humid areas.

Pollen is almost indestructible under certain natural conditions, the best being the wet and highly acid environment of peat bogs. There, it is a valuable indicator of vegetative cover at the time of deposition, which, in turn, serves as an indicator of past climates. In addition, the organic matter in bogs furnishes radiocarbon time scales for pollen deposition. Pollen profiles extending back some 14,000 years are common in the upper Midwest, and sometimes it is possible to identify pollen from 200,000 years ago.

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### Second thoughts on last theorem?

In his letter ("Fermat's feat still mysterious," SN: 8/28/93, p.131), Stephan Chodorov seems to assume that Fermat really did have a short, correct proof of Fermat's last theorem.

But it is worth noting that Fermat lived for nearly 30 years after he wrote his famous (infamous?) marginal note. In all that time, he never published such a proof, nor in all his correspondence with other mathematicians did he even claim to have such a proof. Nor was a proof found among his papers, published posthumously by his son Samuel (which was how the marginal note came to light).

So while it is not impossible that Fermat had some insight that has remained unduplicated for centuries, the truth is in all likelihood more prosaic: Like many people who have attempted to prove the theorem, Fermat made a mistake — but unlike several of them, Fermat caught his mistake before going public.

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