

SCIENCE NEWS®

The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science

Science Service Publication
Volume 146, Nos. 26 & 27, December 24 & 31, 1994

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SCIENCE NEWS (ISSN 0036-8423) is published weekly on Saturday, except the last week in December, for \$44.50 for 1 year or \$78.00 for 2 years (foreign postage \$6.00 additional per year) by Science Service, Inc., 1719 N Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. Second-class postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing office. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to SCIENCE NEWS, P.O. Box 1925, Marion, Ohio 43305. Change of address: Four to six weeks' notice is required — old and new addresses, including zip codes, must be provided.

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Editorial and Business Offices:
1719 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036
(202-785-2255)
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Subscription Department:
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Cover: In the middle mountains of Nepal, farmers using limited equipment have carved staircases of terraced fields out of steep, formerly forested hillsides. Around the world, people are reshaping the planet's surface at a pace that now exceeds most natural processes, according to a study of human effects on the landscape. (Photo: Jack D. Ives/University of California, Davis)



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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

Ozone-friendly sticky foam

In response to a reader's concern about sticky foam (Letters, SN: 9/10/94, p.163), let me note that all recently developed Sandia sticky foams use hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) as the solvent/foaming agent. We are also evaluating fluoriodocarbons (FICs) and hope to change as soon as prices drop on these developmental chemicals.

Pete Rand
Sandia National Laboratories
Albuquerque, N.M.

Uncomfortable truths?

The most remarkable aspect of the reported test results of the National Board of Medical Examiners ("Med-student tally: Who's Number 1?" SN: 9/17/94, p.191) is the failure to point out the most obvious explanation: that white men are in fact, on average, inherently smarter

than women, blacks of either sex, Asians, and Hispanics.

David Lee
Morton Grove, Ill.

The report that white men do better than women and minorities on a multiple-choice test of basic science subjects is an odd and uncomfortable finding. Still, it is there and requires some examination.

To trivialize it by suggesting that white men have some presumably innate ability to make quick, educated guesses eliminates examination of other possibilities and supports the dogma that whenever white men do something better than others, something is wrong.

To argue that multiple-choice tests predict a condition called "better doctor" presumes there is a measure for such — and that is highly unlikely.

But do I want my physician to be knowledgeable in basic science? Surely I do. Do I want my physician to make good, quick, edu-

cated guesses? Oh yes, particularly in an emergency.

So far, in the absence of data, it is faith that asserts "it may be that women and minorities will excel at Parts II and III of the test, which do look at patient skills." Maybe.

But what happens if they do not excel? Aha, stop testing and confer degrees based on... what?

Bertram Rothschild
Aurora, Colo.

A Ms identification

Your article "Did Insects Skim Before They Flew?" (SN: 10/29/94, p.276) reveals some gender confusion.

You refer to "his close examination" when discussing the work of paleontologist Jarmila Kukalova-Peck. Jarmila is a thoroughly feminine Czech name.

Irina Nelidow
St. Louis, Mo.

DECEMBER 24 & 31, 1994

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