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Free-market fossils

With respect to Mr. Batteiger's letter (SN: 2/14/98, p. 99), it should be remembered that dinosaur fossils are not artichokes. No free market for such fossils will ever develop, any more than it will for Picassos, because they are not just rare, each is unique.

Demand, in such markets, does not drive supply, and since there can never be an entire crop of identical fossils reaching the market at the same time, sellers never have to compete with each other for the attention of buyers. The fossil business is strictly a sellers' market.

Mr. Batteiger's dream of buyers influencing the quality of excavations might happen if buyers found the fossils and then took competitive bids from professional excavators. However, when an excavator owns a fossil, there can never be some guy down the street offering to excavate the same fossil with greater care. In this environment, buyers take what they can get.

One improvement might be for fossils to be auctioned before excavation. This would be more speculative than bidding for an excavated find, but it would at least allow the buyer to control the site.

*William Fenton
Alexandria, Va.*

Searching for larval liquid

I was most excited to read of the chemical stored in beetle larvae's glands: "The ants literally do back flips to get away from it" ("Beavers bite trees, benefit baby beetles," SN: 2/7/98, p. 85).

Where and when can I get sufficient quantities of this miracle fluid for my kitchen? A lesser-known by-product of El Niño seems to be increased ant migration.

*Millie Weifert
Santa Cruz, Calif.*

Smearing the goo from cottonwood leaf beetle larvae on doorways would repel ants, but if there are no infested cottonwood trees in your neighborhood, "try making a solution of

aspirin," says ecologist Gregory Martinsen. The chemical exuded by the baby beetles is closely related to salicylic acid, the active compound in aspirin. —M.N. Jensen

Perceived health only for teens

My colleagues and I were gratified to see a report on our research in a recent issue of SCIENCE NEWS ("Blinded by beauty," SN: 2/7/98, p. 91). We do need to set the record straight on one point of information, however.

Our article looked at raters' perceptions of the subjects' health only in adolescence, not in later years. The focus was on evolutionary implications, and we are not sure that perceived health in later years has the same evolutionary implications as perceived health in adolescence.

In future publications, we do intend to report on perceived health in later years, whether it is accurate, and whether it is strongly related to perceived attractiveness.

*S. Michael Kalick
Boston, Mass.*

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Cover: As courts increasingly face complex scientific issues, the judicial system is experimenting with ways to keep junk science out of the courtroom. **Page 249** (Photo illustration: Mark Gilvey, Design Imaging)

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