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Cover: This green sea turtle in Hawaiian waters bears small fibropapilloma tumors, a noncancerous but debilitating disease. Research has begun linking toxic algae, climate, and pollution to such emerging, poorly understood marine epidemics. **Page 72** (Photo: Ursula Keuper-Bennett)

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Letters

Crisis without confidence

"Geologists anticipate an oil crisis soon" (SN: 10/31/98, p. 278) contains a lot of economic nonsense. The most egregious statement is the remark that "by 2020, demand will exceed supply by 17 million barrels a day." The price of oil will move as necessary to clear the market (bring about equality between demand and supply) in exactly the way prices move to clear every other market.

Also nonsensical is Campbell and Laherere's hypothesis that oil production will peak when the quantity of oil burned equals the quantity remaining to be extracted. Oil producers, like all other businesses, seek to maximize the present value of their profit flow. What is it about such behavior that would make them want to reduce production just because the world has used up exactly half the existing oil?

Like Joseph storing grain during the 7 years of plenty in order to have it available in the 7 years of famine, oil producers will withhold some of their oil today to have it available in the future.

Finally, producers of competing energy sources will step up their efforts as the supply of oil diminishes and its price rises.

*John J. Seater
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, N.C.*

Oil is a finite resource formed only rarely in time and place in the Earth's long history. Accordingly, production starts and ends at zero. It should surprise Mr. Seater that the production peak comes in between, around the midpoint of depletion. The endowment of most geological basins in the world is now known within reasonable limits, thanks to the advances in technology. Most, apart from the Middle East, are past or close to the midpoint of depletion. As the International Energy Agency confirms, the non-Middle East countries will peak around 2000, and the global peak is not long delayed.

*Colin J. Campbell
Petroconsultants
Geneva, Switzerland*

Shifting assumptions

An accelerating universe needs a "force"

behind it, at least, per Newtonian models. Rather than creating more ways to explain these data as well as the discoveries of more and more distant (and complex) galaxies ("Studies support an accelerating universe," SN: 10/31/98, p. 277), perhaps it is time to revisit our standard model and to also ask "what if" questions concerning our assumptions, say, of the fundamental value of "c." After all, we've only measured this constant over the past 100 years, and extrapolations into the millions and billions of years may, in fact, provide significant errors.

*Del Dietrich
Campbell, Calif.*

Really chicken research

Please tell me that the research into the reaction of chickens to flying raccoons was not funded by the U.S. taxpayer ("The Science of EEEEEK" SN: 9/12/98, p. 174). By the way, my own, privately-funded, research reveals that raccoons are mildly amused but otherwise unaffected by the sight of flying chickens. Documentation available to interested parties.

*Bill Black
Falmouth, Mass.*