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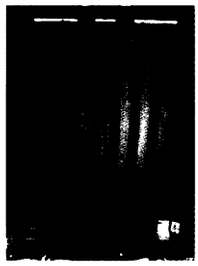
This Week

Articles

Departments



Cover: The Star-Spangled Banner, the very flag that inspired the U.S. national anthem, is being treated in a 3-year, $18 million preservation project at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. **Page 408**
(Photo: D.E. Hurlbert, Smithsonian Institution)

Letters

It's a gas in the grass

It would seem that the source of the grass for the study described in "Gas emissions from mowed grass" (SN: 4/3/99, p. 223) might be important. Chemicals used in treating the grass would also be contained in the trimmings and could affect the emissions.

Frank Deits
Ridgecrest, Calif.

The article would indicate that any aerobically decomposing vegetation would be harmful to the environment. Are we organic gardeners now to conclude that our composting is polluting the atmosphere?

Richard Hill
Tucson, Ariz.

In our work, we studied a wide variety of plants: clover, alfalfa, and corn grown under controlled conditions in a research greenhouse and grass and cottonweed from outside our laboratory. All of them showed the same response to plant damage. It is not likely that any chemical taken up by the plant during growth plays a role in this process.

Drying cut grass is different from composting. The volatile organic compounds our paper describes are released by the plant itself, as a defense against the damage caused by the cutting and drying. During composting, bacteria decompose the plant material, and gases like methane are released.

Joost de Gouw
Utrecht University
Utrecht, The Netherlands

It's too easy seeking green

The article "Parasites make frogs grow extra legs" (SN: 5/1/99, p. 277) reports on some outstanding work by Pieter Johnson and his colleagues. However, the article states that "[this] parasite work [will not] dampen interest in UV and pollutant research at the Environmental Protection Agency's Duluth, Minn., office." I find it distressing, albeit somewhat amusing, that at a time of poor support for the basic sciences EPA would even consider investing in studies to look for a link between environmental UV exposure and gross deformity. Pollutants, of course. But UV? Unless amphibians in Minnesota deposit their eggs on the surface of the water (they don't), UV-A and UV-B would have little or no impact on embryonic development. Further, ponds at that latitude haven't seen enough UV-C since Pangaea to give cause for consideration. Distribution of our scarce research dollars with no regard for the purpose of the studies or their possible conclusions and applications is unconscionable.

John M. Nelson
Richland, Wash.

Digital fluency fallacy

In "Developing digital fluency" (SN: 5/8/99, p. 303), a National Research Council panel suggests that entire college curricula be modified to ensure that every graduate becomes a computer guru. This makes about as much sense as determining that all college graduates should be their own attorneys, physicians, accountants, or plumbers.

Barlow Soper
Louisiana Tech University
Ruston, La.