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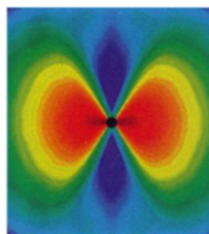
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Cover: Recent observations have strengthened the link between black holes and gamma-ray bursts. According to a standard model, a black hole (black dot at center) gathers a dense disk of gas (yellow and red) around its equator. This configuration squeezes energy from the polar regions into gamma-ray-emitting jets (dark blue).

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Letters

Fishy punch lines

One factor in the scarcity of barndoor skates and other large species may be hiding in the second paragraph of your article "Skating to extinction" (SN: 5/1/99, p. 280). A dirty little secret of the New England fishing industry is suggested in the parenthetical statement that the barndoor tastes like scallops. I remember, about 50 years ago, my uncle laughing at the number of times he had seen kitchen workers in Boston restaurants punching "scallops" out of skate fins.

*Robert A. Arey
Jersey City, N.J.*

I have been a sports fisherman all my life and sometimes a commercial fisherman. Not only does trawling kill everything in its path, it also destroys the bottom and churns it to a muddy soup that covers and kills nearby vegetation. Until we ban indiscriminate methods of fishing, we will see greater and greater amounts of capital spent catching fewer and fewer fish with an ever-increasing by-catch. Using long lines, drift nets, and trawlers has

about the same mentality as setting a grass fire to drive a herd of buffalo over a cliff.

Making fishermen bring in everything they catch would also limit by-catch. At least it would fill up their holds and limit the endless hours of trawling to catch a few fish and kill a lot more.

*Gordon Couger
Stillwater, Okla.*

Befriend a plant, save the world?

The article "Plants signal stress with a toluene burst" (SN: 5/1/99, p. 279) points out how important it is to say there is much we do not know about our environment. The environmentalists who insist we fall on our swords because of conclusions reached with incomplete knowledge and data now have another piece of crow to digest. But digest it they will. I

CORRECTION

In "The case of the missing carbon dioxide" (SN: 6/12/99, p. 383), Richard A. Houghton originally calculated in 1994 that residents of the tropics add 1.6 billion tons of carbon to the atmosphere each year.

can see it now. EPA will create a program to "increase the self-esteem of plants" in order to reduce stress and therefore pollution.

*Jim Seeser
Columbia, Mo.*

Scientists recognize that even in urban areas, a significant portion of volatile organic compounds are from natural, biological sources. So, reducing emissions from cars and industry may not make a dent in urban smog. —C. Wu

E-ecology?

In agriculture, monocultures often enhance the evolution or spread of disease-causing organisms, and crop failures can be devastating. The Melissa virus "evolved" on a monoculture of PC clones, and virus-protection software is applied like pesticides ("Looking beyond the Melissa virus," SN: 5/8/99, p. 303). Perhaps ecology could be considered in future designs for computer-operating systems. Like biodiversity, computer diversity may provide greater stability. At least, we could use some hybrid vigor.

*Stuart Croghan
La Grande, Ore.*