Letters

The Incorrect Use of "Base"

The ions of calcium, magnesium, and potassium, especially when they are held as exchangeable ions on colloids, are often referred to collectively as "bases" by workers in soils and some related subjects. This absurd mistake is made by men of some repute and extends to recent textbooks, which must thereby confuse the next generation of students. The offenders may excuse themselves by saying that they want to distinguish calcium and magnesium ions (which produce trivial acidity on interaction with water) from aluminum and ferric ions (which produce much acidity), and that *base* is the only word they can think of for the former.

It is apparently useless in dealing with such people to point to the work of Brønsted of over 30 years ago, so perhaps we should make it easier for them to reform. In fact, no short term exists for "rare-earth cations of charge one or two other than beryllium." "Nonhydrolyzing cations" (which comes closer to the intention) is also too long. The word *alkalon* has been suggested, by analogy with *lanthanon*, which could replace the clumsy "elements of the rare earths." Whether or not *alkalon* is acceptable, it is important that a short alternative term be invented, in order to put an end to the present misuse. Editors might then be bold enough to refuse to print the word *base* when it is used, as it commonly is, to mean "very weak acid."

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Blood Typing of Aged Material

Madeleine Smith's article on "Blood groups of the ancient dead" [*Science* **131**, 699 (1960)], published under the heading "Current problems in research" and summarizing the work done to date in blood typing of aged bone or tissue, gives the impression that paleoserology presently provides a useful tool for research into the history and genetics of ancient populations. Unfortunately, this is not the case, at least at present.

Smith, in summarizing the developments in technique and reports of typings since the beginning work of Boyd in 1933, fails to include in her bibliography the paper by F. P. Thieme and C. M. Otten entitled "The unreliability of blood typing aged bone" [*Am. J. Phys. Anthropol.* **15**, No. 3 (1957)],