Letters

Air Pollutants Study

As a meteorologist who had no connection with either the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) or the National Science Foundation, I would like to suggest that, in the matter of the proposed NCAR Fate of Air Pollutants Study (News and Comment, 5 Oct. 1973, p. 36; Letters, 28 Dec. 1973, p. 1295), the aspect that was really "poorly thought out" was the effect of its being "scrapped."

An inexcusable delay will now be suffered in the starting of a study that must and will be carried out. Even though there is, at this time, an apparent lack of appreciation that the fate of air pollutants can have an important bearing on the physical processes that affect our weather, visibility, and climate (especially what we leave as a heritage to our grandchildren), pressures from health-effects researchers will soon demand such a study. For instance, the life cycle of secondary and tertiary fine particulates, some of the more insidious air pollutants, must be more fully understood if they are to be properly combated.

It will take a long time to again assemble the talent, experience, and capabilities represented in the NCAR atmospheric chemistry group. They were uniquely suited for the task they had outlined for themselves, and their scattering to less-than-critical masses is a great loss to atmospheric science and a discredit to NCAR.

R. A. McCormick
1000 Deerfield Drive,
Raleigh, North Carolina 27609

Unemployed Biologists

The letter from T. H. Curry concerning unemployment among biologists (28 Dec. 1973, p. 1295) calls attention to the "startlingly high rate of unemployment (6 percent) among biologists." This value gives a wrong impression because it represents incidence of unemployment (the percentage unemployed at some time during the year) rather than the prevalence of unemployment (the percent unemployed at any particular moment during the year). Unemployment rates reported by the government are prevalence values. An incidence value cannot be changed to a prevalence value unless the average duration of unemployment is known. The prevalence of unemployment among biologists is probably about 1.5 percent.

David E. Davis
Department of Zoology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh 27607

Underground Coal Gasification

We read Philip H. Abelson's editorial "Underground gasification of coal" (28 Dec. 1973, p. 1297) with keen interest. As Abelson suggests, in situ coal gasification is finally coming into its own after a century of studies. Recent developments in the United States are promising, in contrast to earlier work (*1*). Both the U.S. Bureau of Mines (*2*) and the Gulf Research and Development Corporation (*3*) have published results of field experiments that basically represent extensions of older gasification technology.

The Lawrence Livermore Laboratory has developed a new method (*4*) of in situ coal gasification that would be applicable to deep, thick Western coal deposits, those cited as the most attractive in Abelson's editorial. This method could also be applied to steeply dipping thinner coal beds, which are difficult to mine with current technology. The concept is to employ chemical explosives emplaced in an array of drilled holes to fracture thick (15 to 30 meters) coal beds at depths of from 150 to 900 meters. The resulting permeable bed would then be ignited and gasified with steam and oxygen, with a horizontal reaction zone moving vertically downward (or upward) through the fractured region. The main difference between our proposed concept and previous methods is that the flow paths in the coal would be clearly defined, which would prevent short circuiting of the inlet and product gases and the burning of product gas underground. We began our feasibility studies about 2 years ago, and our preliminary results (*5*) are encouraging; we hope to obtain funding to proceed with the development of a technology that offers the possibility of low-cost energy (*6*) and relatively minimal environmental consequences.

D. R. Stephens
A. D. Pasternak
A. Maimoni
Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, University of California, Livermore

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Mangroves, Isopods, and the Ecosystem

Andrew Rhem and Harold J. Humm call attention (12 Oct. 1973, p. 173) to the activities of the wood-boring isopod *Sphaeroma terebrans* Bate (*S. destructor* Richardson) centered in the Ten Thousand Islands region of southwestern Florida. *Sphaeroma* bores into the prop roots of the red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle* L.) causing the eventual destruction of the trees along the perimeters of islands and shorelines. The authors judge this to be an "ecocatastrophe of serious magnitude" but stop short of suggesting that an eradication program may be necessary.

The observed activities of *Sphaeroma* and the prognosis by Rehm and Humm are not dissimilar from the recent activity of the coral-eating starfish (*Alicanthaster planci*) in the Pacific and the