LETTERS

African Drought

Garrett Hardin (Letters, 15 Mar., p. 1284) states that bad years occur as a matter of course in Africa and therefore "[i]t is only prudent to define the carrying capacity as being well below any momentary maximum attainable in a good year." What is needed, he argues, is radical population control and prudent management; without population control, he says, the technological solutions listed by Jean Mayer (Editorial, 15 Feb., p. 707) to help Africans predict droughts and ride them out are "useless."

This is temperate zone science in which the "wisdom" of Western resource management is transferred inappropriately to the rest of the world. The tropics, indeed, are characterized by resource fluctuations. The economical way to exploit such environments is to track the fluctuations opportunistically, as traditional populations long have done (*1*). African pastoralists, for example, have habitually exploited forage variations by moving their herds to the good places each year and season, and they have developed various mechanisms of stock redistribution within the society to recover rapidly from a drought.

Population control must be exercised in Africa as anywhere in the world, but perhaps the most pragmatic solutions to the modern problems of African food production will lie in the direction of enabling people to carry out their management adaptations in a timely and efficient way. Obvious improvements along these lines are better transportation, the development of markets, and livestock and seed banks.

Better weather monitoring is also needed to enable a response to be made to drought as soon as it develops. Unlike Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 41), we will never be able to predict a drought 7 years before it begins. But the modern technology and traditional knowledge is already available to allow planners to emulate Joseph's program as Pharoah's overseer: to take advantage of production during times of plenty to tide the people through times of famine.

A. ENDRE NYERGES
Department of Anthropology, University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 19104

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Automobile Fuel Efficiency

In their article "Technological trends in automobiles" (10 Aug., p. 587), Emmett J. Horton and W. Dale Compton of the Ford Motor Company described automobiles with fuel economies "in excess of 100 miles per gallon (mpg) on the highway" as being potentially the " 'average' vehicle of the late 1990's." (One hundred mpg would correspond to 2.35 liters of fuel consumed per 100 kilometers). This is technically correct. Volkswagen and Volvo have already demonstrated attractive prototypes that achieve about 65 mpg on the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) composite (55 percent urban and 45 percent highway) driving cycle and more than 70 mpg on the highway. These prototypes do not include such technologies as wide-range, continuously variable transmissions, or turbocompounded adiabatic diesels (*1*), which should allow further dramatic fuel efficiency improvements.

Tom Bull, A. Alic, and L. L. Jenny (Letters, 8 Mar., p. 1156) are also correct when they state that such "very fuel-efficient automobiles . . . may not appear until well into the 21st century." Indeed, at the current rate we will never get there. The trend toward improved fuel economy in new U.S. automobiles has been essentially stalled since 1981 (*2*), Ford and General Motors are not meeting the federally mandated Corporate Average Fuel Economy standard of 27.5 mpg for model year 1985, and these same companies are requesting (*3*) that the Department of Transportation lower the standards for subsequent years to 26 mpg. Currently, 26 mpg as measured by the EPA test used to monitor compliance with the standards corresponds to about 22 mpg for average on-the-road driving (*4*).

How then are the nation and the world to realize the enormous technological potential for automotive fuel savings? The only suggestion made in the Horton-Compton article and the letter by Bull *et al.* is that future increases in oil prices will eventually encourage further increases in automobile fuel economy. But, even with quite large increases in fuel prices, it is unlikely that "the invisible hand" of the market will result in the realization of more than a small fraction of the potential fuel savings (*5*).

According to auto manufacturers, new car buyers will only invest in fuel economy improvements that pay for themselves within the first 2 to 3 years of ownership—typically about 30,000 vehicle-miles. Over this distance, a fuel economy improvement from 14 mpg [the

U.S. average in 1973 (*2*)] to 22 mpg (approximately the current on-the-road average for new U.S. cars) would save 780 gallons of fuel or about $1000 at current U.S. fuel prices. This is a substantial saving, and the invisible hand of the market therefore assisted the federal fuel economy standards in the post-1979 period in encouraging the auto manufacturers to make available more fuel-efficient cars.

The invisible hand will be much weaker in pressing for further improvements. Only one-third as much fuel would be saved in improving automotive fuel economy from 30 to 40 mpg, for example, as was saved in moving from 14 to 22 mpg. Perhaps this is why gasoline prices approximately double those in the United States have not pushed the average fuel economy of automobiles in Europe and Japan above about 30 mpg.

Therefore, although fuel economy improvements to 50 or even 100 mpg may be cost-effective to the consumer at higher fuel prices, the market incentives to realize those savings are relatively small and any "friction" in the market is likely to result in these savings not being achieved.

There are, however, both national and international interests in improved automobile fuel economy that are not reflected in the price of gasoline. Two points are relevant to U.S. short-term interests:

1) In 1984, the United States paid $60 billion for oil imports—approximately equivalent to the amount of gasoline consumed by U.S. automobiles (*6*).

2) Aside from the defense of Western Europe, the principal rationale for the huge U.S. investment in improved capabilities for "force projection" overseas is to preserve Western access to that half of the world's oil reserves that lie under the Persian Gulf region (*7*).

In the longer term, the current oil "glut" will go the way of previous gluts and we will continue our movement out of our "fuel's paradise" (*8*) into a post-petroleum era of less-abundant and higher-cost liquid fuels for transportation. If we steadily improve automobile fuel economy, we can make the transition gracefully. Otherwise, it may well involve further traumatic and costly shocks.

Concern that large potential fuel savings for the nation might remain unrealized, even though they could be achieved at relatively low cost, inspired Congress to set federal fuel economy standards in 1975. The same reasoning moved a group of Senators to propose in 1980 that the federal automotive fuel economy standards be programmed to continue to rise from their 1985 level of 27.5 mpg to 40 mpg in 1995 (*9*). A number of official studies (*10*) found this goal to be both feasible and probably cost-effective to the consumer. However, opposition from the auto manufacturers and the ideological opposition of the Reagan Administration to governmental interference with the market resulted in the abandonment of the effort.

In the absence of new government policy initiatives, the important technological potential for improved automobile fuel economy described by Horton and Compton will therefore remain largely untapped.

FRANK VON HIPPEL
Center for Energy and Environmental Studies, School of Engineering/ Applied Science, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544

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Biomass Programs

In Constance Holden's interesting synopsis of the World Resources Institute conference on biomass energy "Is bioenergy stalled?" (News and Comment, 1 Mar., p. 1018), a remark I made concerning training in bioenergy systems is quoted out of context and could easily be misunderstood. Attendees will recall that, during a presentation on "the biomass transistor" (a hypothetical, cheap, mass-manufactured, small-scale, simple but highly sophisticated device for converting raw biomass into high value products), I observed that only at the University of Hawaii and at the University of Nancy in France could a student pursue fundamental studies at the molecular level directed toward exploiting the unique thermochemical properties of biopolymers and producing high-value chemicals and fluid fuels. In the broader field of biomass combustion, gasification, and pyrolysis, fine programs exist at many universities. These include (in the United States) University of Arizona, Clarkson College, University of Connecticut, Colorado School of Mines, University of Delaware, Georgia Tech, University of Idaho, Kansas State, Florida State, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Michigan State, Mississippi State, University of Missouri, University of Montana, Stanford University, Texas Tech, Texas A&M, University of Utah, University of Washington, and University of Wisconsin. Universities with programs in biomass fermentations are too numerous to list. When one considers federal and industry attitudes toward biomass, it is remarkable that so much activity exists in universities.

MICHAEL J. ANTAL, JR.
Department of Mechanical Engineering, College of Engineering, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu 96822

Warren Magnuson

Colin Norman makes a grievous error in his briefing "U.S. sanctions required to enforce whaling ban" (News and Comment, 22 Mar., p. 1447) when he refers to "the late Senator Warren Magnuson."

Happily, his friends celebrated with the very much alive Warren Magnuson his 80th birthday on 12 April 1985. People concerned about whales, and all of the hundreds of millions of human beings living in a world that is benefiting from his concern for the advancement of science, especially his initiative in establishing the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, should celebrate his great public service.

FREDERICK P. THIEME
Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum, University of Washington, Seattle 98195

Erratum: In Gina Kolata's article "Avoiding the schistosome's tricks" (Research News, 18 Jan., p. 285), *Schistosoma mansoni* and *S. japonicum* were inadvertently interchanged in the first full paragraph of the first column on page 286. *Schistosoma japonicum* lives in the mesenteric veins of the upper (small) intestine, and *S. mansoni* lives in the mesenteric veins of the lower (large) intestine.