

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

## Alabama Schools Disclaim Evolution

At a 9 November meeting of the Alabama State Board of Education, where TV cameras showed Governor Fob James shambling across the floor imitating an ape and many in the audience wore badges reading "Don't monkey with my children," board members voted to include an anti-evolution "disclaimer" in public school biology textbooks starting next year.

Last April, textbook guidelines were revised to emphasize that evolution is only a theory, not established fact (*Science*, 7 April, p. 33). But because the board didn't feel that the biology books selected were tentative enough about evolution, the ones used next year will contain an insert labeling evolution "a controversial theory some scientists present as a scientific explanation for the origin of living things. ..." It also reads: "No one was present when life first appeared on earth. Therefore, any statement about life's origins should be considered as theory, not fact." And it poses four questions for young minds to consider, such as: "Why do major groups of plants and animals have no transitional forms in the fossil record?" Joan Kendall, chair of

the education committee of the Eagle Forum, calls the disclaimer nothing more than "good science." It's a "major victory because up till now the problems with evolutionary theory have been expunged from the books."

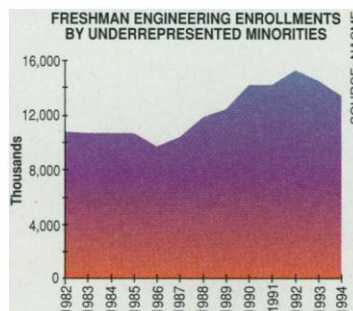
The issue of teaching evolution flares up every 5 years in Alabama, when new school textbooks are chosen. Anthropologist Eugenie Scott of the National Center for Science Education in El Cerrito, California, says that since the Supreme Court case in 1987 ruled that teaching creationism was religious advocacy, anti-evolutionists are soft-pedaling the religious angle in school fights. "What you see in Alabama is the first statewide success of the evidence-against-evolution approach," she says. Biologist John Frandsen of Tuskegee University adds that while Alabama schools can't purchase nonapproved books, there's nothing to stop school districts from using anti-evolution texts donated by groups like the Eagle Forum. "It's very hard to fight local system by local system," he says. "Once they get this stuff in classrooms, getting it out would be a daunting task indeed."

**Worlds in collision.** A radar carried aboard the space shuttle has supplied new views of terrestrial events obscured by desert sands and therefore undetectable by other means. Here, in an 18-by-20-kilometer



region of northern Sudan called the Keraf Suture, microwaves bounced off the desert have revealed a diagonal fault just east of the Nile River. The fault, hidden by several centimeters to more than a meter of sand, marks the collision between Eurasia and the continent of Gondwana some 650 million years ago to form the "supercontinent" of Greater Gondwana. The discovery, presented at this month's meeting of the Geological Society of America in New

Orleans, is the "first time we've been able to identify the structures caused by the collision," says Robert Stern, a member of the radar team from the University of Texas, Dallas. Stern says the images also help illuminate the history of the Nile and what controls its course.



## Tracking Autism Genes

Autistic people are born that way. Babies don't cuddle or make eye contact, and they grow into withdrawn, unemotional adults. Although biologists say autism is heritable, locating the defective genes is tricky, not least because autistic children rarely reproduce—making it difficult to track the disorder through families.

But there's growing evidence that many parents of autistic children themselves suffer a version—albeit a very mild one—of the disorder. At last month's annual meeting of the American Society of Human Genetics in Minneapolis, two psychiatric geneticists reported a simple technique for monitoring the milder form, a questionnaire called the Friendship Interview. "The interview will help identify relatives with the milder form so we can more easily identify the chromosome locations [of the defect]," says Susan Santangelo of Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, one of the researchers.

To validate the technique, Santangelo and her colleague Susan Folstein conducted the interview—which comprises 13 questions probing the quality of friendships—with the parents of 90 autistic children and compared the results to those from parents of 40 Down syndrome children, chosen to control for the effects of having a handicapped child. Parents of autistic children were almost four times as likely to score in the deviant range, with fewer and less intimate friends than the parents with Down children, who scored in the normal range.

That finding supports the idea that parents of autistic children, although no less caring as parents than anyone else (most of their children are normal) "are somewhat autisticlike but way short of [being] handicapped," says child psychiatrist Sir Michael Rutter of the Center for Social, Genetic, and Developmental Psychiatry, London. The Friendship Interview "will be a useful additional measure" of the mild form of autism, he says.

## Fewer Black Engineers

Engineering enrollments have been declining all over in the past couple of years, but particularly among African Americans, according to the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME). Last year the number of blacks enrolled in freshman engineering programs fell to 7372, down 11% from 1993. The decline for Hispanics was 2.2%, while American Indians increased slightly. The three minorities make up about 6% of U.S. engineering bachelor's degrees. Nonminority enrollment declined by 3.9% during this period.

Students are being frightened off engineering by "false messages" from the job market front, says NACME President George Campbell. Despite industry downsizing and defense layoffs, though, Campbell notes that "there are still more opportunities in engineering than in almost any other field," especially in small, fast-growing high-tech companies.

Campbell says he thinks a "critical factor" in the decline is "the difficulty in financing higher education." But according to the National Science Foundation there has been no decline in the overall number of African Americans who go to college. Therefore, the financial crunch may be affecting minorities more through cutbacks in outreach programs that attract them to science and engineering. Engineer S. Gordon Moore of the Georgia Institute of Technology and the National Society of Black Engineers thinks so, saying such programs are not "the way they used to be."