caution and base our conclusions on scientifically defensible evidence. The evidence is still not conclusive as to whether we can dismiss or substantiate a role for climate change in that phenomenon.

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Rare Trees

The Florida torreya was described in Random Samples (8 Dec., p. 1573) as "the rarest tree in North America." With a population size of only 1500, it is indeed rare; but several other trees may be more worthy of this title. For example, Franciscan manzanita (Arctostaphylos hookeri ssp. franciscana) is presumed extinct in its native habitat on the San Francisco Peninsula, and only occurs in cultivation (1). Another possible candidate is the Presidio manzanita (Arctostaphylos hookeri ssp. ravenii), also native to the San Francisco Bay area, which appears to have a single clone (1). If full species status is required to be North America's rarest tree, I nominate the Catalina Island Mountain Mahogany (Cercocarbus traskiae), whose population size has dwindled to six adult trees (2). This distinctive species is restricted to a gully on the southwest side of Santa Catalina Island off the coast of California. When the population was first discovered in 1897, it consisted of more than 40 trees, but it has declined rapidly over the past century because of overgrazing by introduced herbivores. Fortunately, it appears to be making a rapid recovery as a result of the recent construction of a fence around two of the remaining trees. More than 70 seedlings have been observed in the fenced area (2).

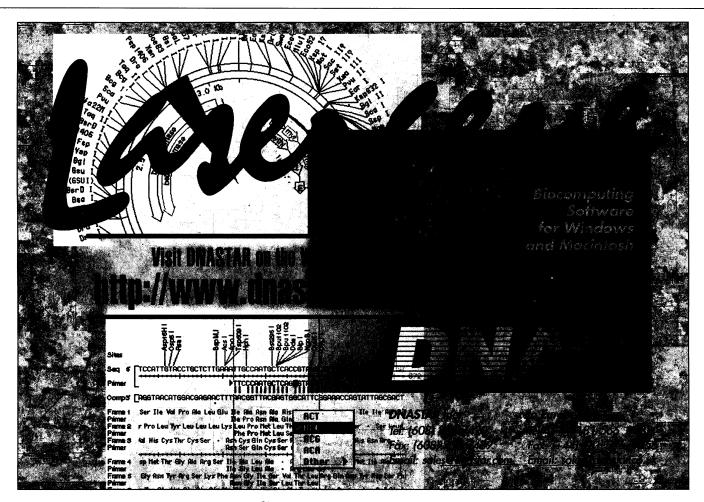
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Italian Academic Turnover

Susan Biggin (News & Comment, 10 Nov., p. 909) is to be congratulated for the clarity of her description of the conundrum of national competitions for university appointments in Italy. Retirement mechanisms are another peculiarity of Italian academic life that are difficult to explain to the international scientific community. Although full professors retire at age 77, at age 72 they officially abandon their chair and enter a special category ("fuori ruolo"), which implies relief from conventional academic duties, but allows them to retain full salary and the right of sitting-and voting—in faculty councils. In the past, chairs could be immediately open for a new appointment. However, because of recent financial constraints in Italy, new appointments for existing chairs now require the availability of ad hoc financial coverage, which in fact is precluded by the simulta-



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