

SCIENCE

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LETTERS

Right pathways

Preservation and responsibility are recurring themes in this week's letters. One correspondent asks, "Do we [scientists and modern society] operate in a sustainable manner?" Other writers describe the care with which a unique set of hominid fossil footprints have been reburied to prevent possible damage from the weather, invasive plants, or intrusive humans. (At right, excavation of the footprints in 1995 before removal of the acacia roots and the fill in the prints.) A third letter points out that collectors, in taking specimens of a rare tree, probably hurried that organism's extinction in the wild. Even "knowledge of research done and under way" is itself a "unique resource" that, it is argued, could be better managed.



NEVILLE AGNEW/GETTY TRUST

Gibbons on NIH Budget

In the ScienceScope item "NSF's up and down budget" (16 Feb., p. 897), I am described as "angry about one number from this year's budget—the 5.7% increase that Congress bestowed on the National Institutes of Health [NIH]." It is implied that my admonitions about "cutthroat squabbling" and "sweetheart deals" were aimed at NIH. Let me clarify: I am not angry with NIH, nor were my remarks about "squabbling" and "deals" a commentary on NIH. To the contrary, I commend NIH for its success in maintaining strong public support.

As I read from my prepared text for the AAAS Annual Meeting, "This [good budget for NIH] reflects the broad perception that research is clearly and directly relevant to the needs and aspirations of the American people." I concluded these remarks by noting that "the rest of the scientific community needs to understand the need to be engaged in developing a similar public perception of its relevance to societal goals."

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The Laetoli Footprints

The 3.6-million-year-old hominid footprints from the Laetoli beds in Tanzania have been extensively reported since their discovery in 1978–1979 (1) (Random Samples, 13 Jan. 1995, p. 171). After excavation and study, the 23-meter-long trackway was reburied and the mound covered with lava

boulders to prevent erosion. By the late 1980s, concerns were being expressed by the scientific community that revegetation by acacia trees on the reburial mound might be damaging the footprints. The probability of intrusion of roots into the Footprint Tuff surface and between the laminae that comprise the individual ash falls was considered to be high after 15 years of unchecked growth.

At the invitation of the Tanzanian government, the Getty Conservation Institute in 1993 entered into a collaborative agreement to undertake the conservation of the trackway site. A strategy was agreed in discussion with the Laetoli Consultative Committee, made up of professional and political representatives from Tanzania, the Unesco regional representative, and specialists in the field of palaeoanthropology. The strategy encompasses in situ preservation through conservation and reburial of the trackway. Alternative proposals to remove the tracks to a museum or to shelter the trackway were deemed inappropriate, because removal would destroy the integrity and context of the site, and impractical given the site's remoteness and the lack of resources.

Preparatory work included a full condition assessment, site stabilization work, the making of new casts from the 1979 cast and, most important, destruction of the 150 trees growing on and adjacent to the trackway. These were killed by application of the biodegradable herbicide Roundup. Contrary to concerns raised about the use of the herbicide (2), we believe it posed no environmental threat. Applied directly to tree stumps, the herbicide was absorbed into the root system and did not affect adjacent vegetation or insect life, which continued to flourish.