

COOL IMAGES

Believe It Or Not

The giant flying creatures called pterosaurs that soared above the dinosaurs about 70 million years ago were reptiles, but in this 1843 drawing an artist has crossed the scaly beasts with a marsupial bat, giving them fur and ratlike ears. Such curious missteps in biology and paleontology are featured at Strange Science—from a 1678 rendition of Earth laced with deep underground rivers and lakes, to a fake sea monster made from five fossil whales that toured the United States and Europe in the mid-1800s. Denver Web page designer Michon Scott says she's "just an interested amateur" paleontologist, but she started posting old pictures from books a couple of years ago and the site took off. Other goodies include a timeline of discoveries (both gaffes and the real thing) and scientist biographies.

www.turnpike.net/~mscott

HOT PICKS

Fast-acting medicine. Want to get your clinical paper out fast? Send it to what's touted as the first all-electronic general medical journal, launched this month by former JAMA editor George Lundberg at his new home, Medscape. Even peer review will be via e-mail at the free (with registration) publication, and Lundberg hopes "the panache of the electronic world will spill over and create a sense of urgency." www.medscape.com

Safety check. Quizzes and a goofy character named Lab Guy pep up topics like fire safety, storing chemicals, and handling blood at this new online lab safety course from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. You can also order free training videos online. www.practicingsafescience.org

Catch some rays. Take a brief tour of the sun at these pages featuring movies of eclipses, solar flares, the photosphere, and more. Wind things up with a grim look at the sun's Earth-incinerating death throes a few billion years from now. www.astro.uva.nl/~michiellb/sun/kaft.htm

NET NEWS

Risk Web Sites Draw Words of Caution

With a quick trip on the Web, you can now find out what chemical brew your town's factories spew or which pesticides might linger on that peach you're about to bite. Environmental groups are taking full advantage of the Net to post chemical data they gather or pry from federal agencies. Some scientists, however, worry that the sites are exaggerating the public health threat by failing to put risks in perspective.

One example is the Environmental Defense Fund's (EDF's)



NETWATCH

edited by JOCELYN KAISER

Scorecard (scorecard.org), a trove on industrial and vehicle emissions that was enhanced this week with controversial estimates of how much emissions actually wind up in the air. Although environmental health scientists give the site high marks for increasing the public's access to chemical data, some are assigning lower grades for how well it puts risks in context. "What they're looking at may be only part of the picture," says Tim Buckley of Johns Hopkins University, who notes that sources of airborne chemicals in a house—like cigarettes and solvents—may dwarf emissions from outside. EDF's Bill Pease agrees with Buckley's analysis, but says his group soon hopes to add data to the site from a study that used personal pollution monitors to track exposures in eight communities.

Scorecard, which is "pretty sophisticated and responsible," shouldn't be confused with less credible sites, says George Gray of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis. One that's come under heavy fire (www.foodnews.org) dips into a database of pesticide tests on foods to suggest which residues may—or may not—taint everything from vegetables to packaged cereals. Foodnews makes little effort to distinguish between acute and chronic exposures and ignores the old saw that "the dose makes the poison," says Gray. "Frankly, they're trying to scare people." Richard Wiles of the Environmental Working Group, the site's sponsor, responds that its methodology is "well within" government guidelines.

SITE VISIT

Weighing In on Bioethics

Cloning, assisted suicide, managed health care—these and other ethical hot-button issues show no sign of fading from public debate. To get up to speed, check out The Bioethics Internet Project. "Ours is the most visited of the primary bioethics sites," claims project director Glenn McGee of the University of Pennsylvania Center for Bioethics. "We take that pretty seriously."

One innovative item on the 5-year-old site is a joint project with the NBC television drama *ER*. Each week, a center master's student gets an advance copy of the upcoming episode and dissects it in an online essay. The site also has links to scholarly journals, including Penn's own *American Journal of Bioethics*. A section on assisted suicide presents legal documents from a recent U.S. Supreme Court case, an online roundtable discussion, and related Web links. An especially popular feature is "Bioethics for Beginners," which offers a historical introduction to medical bioethics and a list of papers and Web sites for students and teachers. According to McGee, "Genetic engineering is now the topic for high school debate classes."

The Bioethics Project doesn't stake out positions on issues, says McGee, but center faculty members do post their own strong viewpoints. "Some bioethics sites are funded by large companies," he notes, "but the center is independent. In bioethics, conflict of interest is everything."

Send Internet news and great Web site suggestions to netwatch@aaas.org

www.bioethics.net

