Possible Ainu Site Creates Buzz

In 1996, biologists working in the wild Kuril islands north of Japan came across the undisturbed remains of several large, circular dwellings sunken into the ground next to a stream. News of the find—probably an ancient site for the Ainu, a seafaring people who still live in Hokkaido—is only now trickling out. And archaeologists are clamoring for a look at the site that, they say, could shed light on everything from the peopling of the Americas to how early human occupation may have altered the fragile balance of species on the rugged islands.

During the last century, the 56-island archipelago, which runs between Hokkaido in Japan and Kamchatka in Russia, has been virtually inaccessible to non-Russians because of its sensitive location during the Cold War and political wrangling between Japan and Russia over who owns the four southernmost islands. Despite the sometimes tense political atmosphere, a team of U.S., Russian, and Japanese biologists, led by Ted Pietsch of the University of Washington (UW), has sailed to the Kurils every summer since 1994.

Circular structures, the largest 22 meters wide, hint at Ainu life in the Kurils.

Intent on gathering specimens of everything from lichens to frogs, the biologists only late last year showed photos of the structures on Onekotan, a northern, uninhabited island, to archaeologist Karl Hutterer, director of UW's Burke Museum, who then spread the word. Insights into Ainu life in the Kurils and the Ainu's possible spread to Alaska's Aleutian islands "would have a major impact on our interpretation of northeast Asian and, potentially, North American prehistory," says anthropologist John Olsen of the University of Arizona, Tucson. He says it would bolster the theory that the earliest Americans may have found their way to the continent not only via the Bering land bridge but also by sea more than 10,000 years ago.

A team led by Pietsch, Hutterer, and three UW colleagues—Ben Fitzhugh, Don Grayson, and Julie Stein—plans to ask the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) to contribute part of the $300,000 needed to launch a joint biology-archaeology survey next year. NSF's Douglas Siegel-Causey won't comment on the proposal but admits he's enthusiastic about the idea: "This is one of those opportunities that you have to grasp when it comes."

Good-bye, Descartes

"Because of the advances we've made over the last decade, the dichotomies between nature and nurture, between biology and psychology, are gone. It's now clear that environmental influences, from learning to medications ... modify thought and behavior by modifying brain structure and functioning, most likely through changes in gene expression."

—Neuroscientist Robert Malenka of the University of California, San Francisco, advocating the death of the nature-nurture debate at a symposium marking the end of the "decade of the brain" held last week at the National Academy of Sciences.

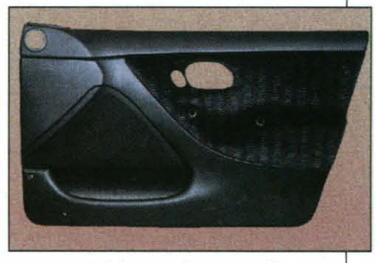
Stuff of Car Seats?

A tropical plant woven into rope for thousands of years in Africa and southern Asia is about to make its debut on Western shores—as an eco-friendly ingredient in car parts and paper.

As its formal name *Hibiscus cannabinus* suggests, kenaf is related to hibiscus, hollyhock, and okra. After 50 years of selection, U.S. and European scientists have developed kenaf varieties that can thrive through the changing seasons in warm, temperate latitudes.

Getting ready to cash in on these advances are Kafus Environmental Industries of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Visteon, a Ford Motor Co. division. In February, the two companies broke ground in Elkhart, Indiana, for the first U.S. kenaf factory. (A factory will also start up this summer in Italy.) When combined with polypropylene, kenaf offers a lighter, recyclable alternative to fiberglass in interior car door panels, seat backs, and trim, says Chuck Taylor of Kafus's kenaf-growing facility in Raymondville, Texas.

Plant biologist Ralph W. Hardy, president of the National Agricultural Biotechnology Council in Ithaca, New York, predicts a booming demand for kenaf as carmakers move into "bio-based materials." Kenaf is also emerging as an economically feasible substitute for wood pulp now that newsprint prices have shot up. Kafus is going after that market as well, with plans for a mill in Lasara, Texas, that could start turning out an annual 120,000 tons of kenaf-based newsprint by next year.



Vegetable car door panel.

A Man of Science

Early American inventor and statesman Benjamin Franklin was the center of a circle of scholars, venerators of Isaac Newton, who wrote to each other avidly about their explorations in the 18th century. This group of intellectual companions—including telegraph inventor Samuel F. B. Morse, botanist William Bartram, and astronomer David Rittenhouse—saw themselves as "men of science." (The word "scientist" was not coined until 1833, in England.) The painting above, done in 1762 when Franklin was 56, is part of an exhibit on "Franklin & Friends" at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., through 6 September.

CREDITS: (TOP) BRIAN K. URBAIN/UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON; (BOTTOM LEFT) PORTRAIT BY MASON CHAMBERLIN/PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART; (BOTTOM RIGHT) KAFUS