

RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Wild Thing

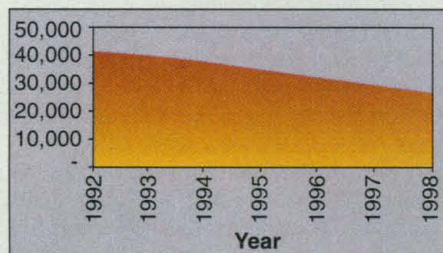
In what's being hailed as the first successful transplant of a frozen embryo from one species to another, an ordinary house cat has given birth to an endangered African wildcat. Scientists say the technique may someday prove useful for saving certain endangered species.

Pulling off the feat was a group led by Betsy Dresser, director of the Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species in New Orleans. Endangered cats seemed a natural for the pioneering experiment, says Dresser. With about 65 million house cats in the United States, there is no shortage of surrogate mothers. Dresser's team spent 6 years trying to get house cats pregnant with fresh embryos from other species, finally succeeding in 1994 when one gave birth to an Indian desert cat. At last they have gotten a frozen embryo to take. On 24 November a house cat named Cayenne delivered a prefrozen baby *Felis sylvestris libyca* named Jazz. The number of this species left in the wild may be no more than 1000.

The birth raises hopes that the technique can stave off extinction for endangered species that reproduce poorly on their own, but whose sperm and embryos can be stockpiled in the freezer in a last-ditch approach to conservation. For now, however, the embryo transfer technique is likely to be too tricky to work for most species and too expensive to serve as a routine way to replenish other populations, says Barbara Durrant, a reproductive physiologist at the San Diego Zoo.



World's first prefrozen wildcat.



Decline in German university enrollments in physics, 1992–98.

since 1993 in the number of students pursuing degrees in most branches of science and engineering. Young people are responding to what they see as a sagging job market for scientists and lucrative opportunities in business and law, says biochemist Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, president of Germany's DFG granting agency.

To counter this trend, the DFG sponsored a pep rally for young scientists at Berlin's new science center last week. And German Physical Society president Alexander M. Bradshaw and German Research Minister Edelgard Bulmahn kicked off a \$1.5 million public education initiative featuring exhibits from quantum optics to astrophysics, in Berlin and Bonn. The Germans don't plan to stop with *Jahr der Physik*. The year 2001 will focus on the life sciences, and 2002 the geosciences.

A Holiday Wish

Overheard in the decked halls of NASA headquarters:

"Ed's * Dreaming of a Mars Landing"
(to the tune of "White Christmas")

Ed's dreaming of a Mars landing,
Just like the ones we used to know.
Where the media listened, the public glistened,
As pictures of the land were shown.

He'd love to hear a real signal,
Just like the ones from Voyager,
But there is no message, the darn thing's silent,
For all we know it fell over.

Ed's dreaming of a Mars journey,
That won't blow up or crash below,
Be it metric measure, or English footage,
Just make the darn thing say hello!

Ed's dreaming of a Mars program,
That he can sell up on the Hill,
May his probes be faster and bright,
And may all his satellites land right!

* Ed Weiler, NASA space science chief.

Love Among the Magnets

Sex in a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machine? Health risks to American saxophonists? The antioxidant properties of James Bond's martinis? Authentic findings

on these and other pressing issues of the day are featured in the year's last issue of the *British Medical Journal*.

The journal's Jill Shepherd explains that throughout the year, the editors stockpile "lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek" submissions for a Christmas double issue. "It is genuine research, peer reviewed," she says. "Readers long for the Christmas issue. Around November they always ask us what's coming up."

Oh yes, the MRI study. Asserting that "it has been extremely difficult to investigate anatomical changes during the act of coitus," doctors at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands got willing couples to climb into an MRI and perform as the magnets whirled. Among their findings: "During intercourse in the 'missionary position' the penis is neither straight nor 'S' shaped as had been previously thought, but is, in fact, the shape of a boomerang."

Germany Seeks to Stoke Science

The country has spawned some of the 20th century's greatest physicists—Einstein, Planck, and Heisenberg, to name a few. But in Germany, as elsewhere, physics has lost a lot of pulling power for the young. Now the country is trying to reverse the trend by declaring 2000 as "*Jahr der Physik*."

Physics is not the only discipline lacking disciples: German universities have reported a steady decline