Celebrating Nerddom

Rallying under the cry "Be there AND be square," nearly 2000 computer geeks and attendant gawkers assembled in Boston on April Fools' Day for the first-ever "Geek Pride" festival, held at the ritzy Park Plaza Hotel.

"Bad hair, pocket protector—and proud" was how the *Boston Herald* headlined the event, kind of a people's computer celebration. The mostly male crowd noshed on Fritos corn chips, played computer games, got free massages, caught up on the electronic music revolution, and railed against Wall Street's attempts to take over the Internet. The throng also gushed over Linux, the "anti-Microsoft" operating system, which is distributed free and has an "open source" setup that allows users to tinker with its code.

The nerds, sporting many a beard and pierced eyebrow, reveled at being with so many kindred souls. "I've been to other things, like *Star Trek* conventions," said Brad Polant, there with his wife April and their "fetal geek," Michael, now 3 months old. "But this is the first for geeks alone."

"We just wanted to have a party for geeks," said Susan Kaup, a Boston freelance programmer who put the event together with Tim McEachern, founder of the Internet radio show *Geek Nation*. Partygoers were treated to a stream of speakers, ranging from establishment sage Sandy Pentland of MIT's Media Lab to Rob Malda, founder of the geek news site Slashdot.org. "Most of the time when I go to a party, there are people I don't like and they're talking about things I'm not interested in," said Malda. "No one's going to bug me about sports here, but I can find a guy who collects video games."

Creative Counting

Researchers trying to get around page-limit rules in grant competitions beware: Don't try to be too clever. At a recent National Science Foundation (NSF) advisory committee hearing, staffer Mike Lesk offered a cautionary tale of an NSF review panel that tossed a proposal that was longer than allowed. Reviewers will often overlook a little long-windedness. But in this case, the applicant peeved the judges with what Lesk called "an old junior high school trick": misnumbering the pages.

Witches' broom fungus grows out of cacao pod.

Cacao Trees Under Fungal Siege

Next time you scarf up a handful of M&Ms, don't take them for granted—they don't grow on trees. But the beans that produce chocolate do, and cacao trees are facing a health crisis.

Cacao trees in Latin America, a prime source of U.S. chocolate, have come under heavy attack from fungal diseases. It's the result of years of monocropping and pesticide use, explains Marlene Machut, a scientist at M&M/Mars in Hackettstown, New Jersey. Growers around the world cultivate only three varieties of cacao, she says, because they usually aren't big enough to afford breeding programs to create new fungus-resistant hybrids. And pesticides have "sterilized" soils of helpful predators.

Losses are now reaching critical levels. "In some places in Latin America, losses of 100% are not uncommon," says economist Eric M. Rosenquist of the Agricultural Research Service in Beltsville, Maryland. And in Africa, trees in the Ivory Coast, the world's top cacao grower, are increasingly vulnerable. "There will be serious shortages in a few years" if the diseases are not contained, says Machut.

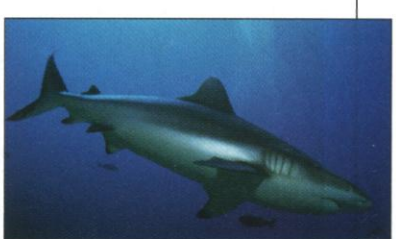
Help may be on the way. Plant scientists from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Latin America have teamed up with chocolate manufacturers to plot counterattacks, such as introducing benign fungi to displace the bad ones and planting cacao between taller coffee trees that supply fungi-stopping shade. But those strategies may not pay off for a decade, says Rosenquist. In the meantime, chocolate lovers may want to take a bit more time to savor their treats—before they are in short supply.

Sharks DO Get Cancer

A new study may blunt the appeal of shark cartilage, a popular folk remedy for cancer. Scientists reported last week that not only do sharks get cancer, but they even get cartilage cancer.

Sharks do have a low cancer incidence, researchers say. This fact, together with 1983 research revealing a shark cartilage protein that inhibits tumor-promoting blood vessels, has been parlayed by alternative medicine entrepreneurs into a lucrative business selling shark cartilage powders and pills as cancer-fighters. The fad went into high gear in the mid-1990s following publication of *Sharks Don't Get Cancer* (by William Lane, the holder of a powder patent) and a big dose of TV publicity. Promoters have also touted the work of biochemist Carl Luer of Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota, Florida, who unsuccessfully tried to induce cancer in sharks by exposing them to carcinogens in the lab. But Luer himself says "there's no evidence that the cartilage is what's protecting them," and a 1998 clinical study found cartilage ineffective against human cancers.

Sharks outside the lab, however, appear to have their share of tumors. Gary Ostrander of The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, and John Harshberger of George Washington University in Washington, D.C., say they found at least 40 cancer cases in sharks and their close relatives after surveying scientific papers and fish tumor samples from the National Cancer Institute's Registry of Tumors in Lower Animals. The cases included three cartilage cancers. The findings were announced last week in San Francisco at the annual meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research.



Tumor-free?

Ostrander says he hopes the study will help explode the "huge myth" that sharks are immune to cancer—a misapprehension shared even by "people in my own field."

CREDITS: (MIDDLE) SCOTT BAUER; (BOTTOM) STUART WESTMORLAND/CORBIS