

X-Fishing for Votes

Talk about election irregularities: In Barton County, Kansas, on 7 November, an extinct fish got 235 write-in votes, only 15 fewer than Ralph Nader. It's all part of a campaign staged by Kansas fossil dealer Alan Detrich, who wants to make *Xiphactinus*, a large fish that roamed the seas of Kansas 85 million years ago, the state fossil.

Detrich—best known for his ongoing attempts to peddle a *Tyrannosaurus rex* for \$20 million—has been agitating for the X-fish, as it's known, since last spring, when he enlisted local grade schoolers in the effort. Voters were instructed to write in the fish on ballots where local politicians were running uncontested. When election officials complained that tabulations would cost more, Detrich called off his troops in exchange for pledges of support from several candidates.

A lot of states have official fossils, but Detrich says this is a "pretty controversial subject" in Kansas—which made itself something of a laughingstock last year when its education board



Famous fish-within-a-fish, a 4-meter *Xiphactinus* with its last meal, on display at Kansas's Sternberg Museum.

when a cast of the famous *T. rex* Sue, whose remains are now settled at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, will be visiting the Sternberg Museum of Natural History in Hays, Kansas.

Another Edge for Kinship

Evolutionary studies have long shown that genetic ties can influence human behavior. For example, scientists have found that parents are more likely to murder stepchildren than biological children. New research by a Princeton economist suggests that blood ties also figure in less extreme actions, such as how much food you give your offspring.

Anne Case and colleagues scoured data on thousands of two-parent families in the United States and South Africa. In the December issue of the *Economic Journal* they report that "children living apart from their biological mothers live in households where systematically less is spent on food." In the United States, natural families spent about 5% more on food per young child each year than did families with foster, step-, or adopted children. In South Africa, where about 20% of black children live apart from their real mothers, mothers living with their own children spent more on healthy foods such as milk and fruit, and less on cigarettes and alcohol. These effects, the authors say, were "surprisingly consistent" across social and economic groups: "The genetic tie to the child, and not any anticipated future economic tie, appears to be the tie that binds."

"I think it's very nifty that sophisticated econometric analyses are being brought to bear on the whole range of step-parental investment, something our analyses of violence cannot do," says psychologist Martin



Some truth to Cinderella story?

Daly of McMaster University in Ontario, who with Margo Wilson did the homicide research. Psychologist Glenn Weisfeld of Wayne State University in Detroit adds: "The deleterious effects of stepparenting are finally being acknowledged."

Haiku Corner

I play with numbers.
I build stuff with blinking lights.
Am I man or child?

—Mats Selen, University of Illinois

Psycho physicist,
ranting about D mixing—
most entertaining.

—David Cinabro, Wayne State Univ.

From a book of poems, *Tuning the Beam*, produced at the Cornell Synchrotron under the inspiration of Bridget Meeds, who spent last April as Wilson Lab's poet-in-residence.

Just as India resumed construction of a hotly contested giant dam on the Narmada River, the World Commission on Dams has issued a report saying that, for the most part, the costs of the 45,000 large dams operating around the world have outweighed their benefits.

The commission, sponsored by the World Bank and the World Conservation Union, released its report last month in London. Dam benefits "in too many cases" have been gained at "an unacceptable and often unnecessary price," said the group, headed by South African education minister Kader Asmal. They have degraded and fragmented 60% of the world's waterways, displaced 40 million to 80 million people, and led to "the irreversible loss of species, populations and ecosystems," says the report. It adds that efforts to mitigate impacts on wildlife have almost invariably been half-hearted and ill-informed. It also notes recent evidence that, because of carbon emissions from rotting vegetation in reservoirs, hydropower is not necessarily cleaner than fossil fuels. No dam should be built without the consent of the people affected, it concludes.

Global Commission Slams Dams

Dam critics, such as the International Rivers Network of Berkeley, California, called on funding agencies to put a moratorium on the support of dam-building until they have adopted the commission's recommendations (see worldbank.org/dams). Germany has announced that it will incorporate the report into dam-funding guidelines. The World Bank has already throttled back on dams: It's funding fewer than 1% of dam projects worldwide, down from 3% in the 1970s.



A 17th century monument flooded by India's Narmada River dam.