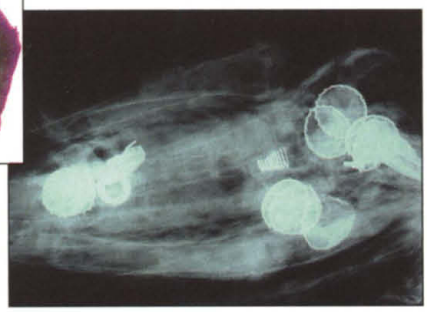


Condor family in nest. X-ray, right, shows that chick was filled with rubbish.

Condor Failure

The first three baby condors to be born in the wild since 1984 have died over the course of the last month in Los Padres National Forest in California. Born 5 months ago, the birds succumbed just before they were expected to fly for the first time from their rocky nest.

Scientists are still sorting out the causes of death. Elevated copper levels were found in the first chick. The second was found to have swallowed a dozen bottle caps as well as pieces of glass and plastic—attractive rubbish flown in by the parents. Results are still awaited from the third bird, being examined at the San Diego Zoo.

Scientists are hoping to keep closer tabs next time around: There are believed to be as many as seven condor breeding pairs in California and Arizona.

Jabs on the Stem Cell Front

The philosophical battle over stem cell research and cloning in particular seems to be taking a nasty turn. In the most recent clash, prominent stem cell scientist John Gearhart slammed bioethicist Leon Kass for suggesting that researchers who reject restrictions on research cloning are "rogues and rascals."

At the heart of the exchange are comments Kass made to the *San Francisco Chronicle* in its 20 October issue. The University of Chicago academic, who heads the President's Council on Bioethics, pooh-poohed the notion that some top U.S. scientists might leave the country if the government banned research cloning. "The best scientists are those who are perfectly happy to live under those strictures," said Kass. "The few rogues and rascals who won't live here, we are well rid of." Kass also said science "deliberately doesn't ask questions about the what and the why of things. It only asks how they work."

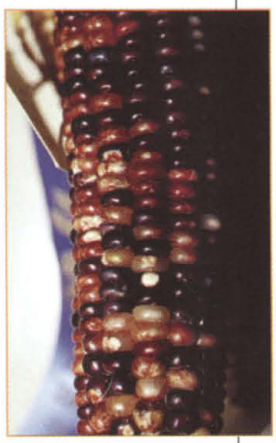
At a symposium last week in Baltimore, Maryland, Johns Hopkins University's Gearhart fired back with an old quote from the late physicist Richard P. Feynman: "Philosophers say a great deal about what is absolutely necessary for science, and it is always, so far as one can see, rather naïve and probably wrong."

Corn Row

Hostilities are still running high in Mexico's year-old maize wars. Last month, the president of the Mexican National Institute of Ecology (INE) attacked the journal *Nature* for rejecting an institute study that he said confirmed the presence of illicit transgenic maize in southern Mexico.

"Our data suggest that the transgenics are here," INE president Exequiel Ezcurra told the daily *La Jornada* on 22 October. He charged that *Nature*'s rejection was on "ideological" grounds—a reference to pressure allegedly exerted on the journal by the biotech industry.

Last November, two Berkeley researchers ignited a worldwide furor by claiming, in a paper in *Nature*, that transgenic maize was common in the southern state of Oaxaca, the crop's "center of origin"—and a possible threat to its genetic foundation (*Science*, 1 March, p. 1617). The presumed source is U.S. transgenic maize, which is allowed to be sold but not grown in Mexico. Scientists harshly criticized the methodology of the Berkeley paper, and 5 months later, *Nature* took the near-unprecedented step of saying the evidence was "not sufficient to justify" publication.



Meanwhile, two Mexican groups—one at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the other at a government research agency—investigated the matter. They sent their report, which they said confirmed the presence of transgenic maize, to *Nature*.

According to Ezcurra, *Nature*'s reviewers issued contradictory explanations for the rejection, one calling the findings "obvious" and the other calling them "incredible." In a highly unusual public response, *Nature* editor Philip Campbell told *La Jornada* that its account was "mistaken," and that there were three referees, all of whom "agreed that the conclusions of the paper could not be justified on the grounds of the reported evidence."

The explanation has done little to quell the dispute. Peter Rosset, co-director of the U.S.-based Food First/The Institute for Food and Development Policy, charged that the rejection of these "crystal clear" results could "give the impression of a cover-up."

NSF's top managers, Joe Bordogna and Rita Colwell, celebrate with a cake.

NSF Celebrates Faster Service

Whenever the National Science Foundation (NSF) asks its "customers" to suggest improvements, the answer from scientists submitting grant proposals is always the same: Don't keep us waiting so long. Four years ago NSF turned that plea into an imperative to staff: Notify at least 70% of your customers of the fate of their grant application within 6 months of submission. This year NSF, with the help of electronic grants management, got over the hump—averaging 74% on the more than 40,000 proposals processed in the fiscal year ending 30 September. That's up from 54% in 2000. So last week it celebrated with an Academy Award–style celebration featuring cake, corny speeches, and loving cups.

Unfortunately for applicants, a faster turnaround time doesn't translate into a higher success rate. That has held steady for a decade at just above 30%.

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