Letters

Conservation Biology: Its Origins and Definition

The article "Conservation biology in the fast lane" by Ann Gibbons (News & Comment, 3 Jan., p. 20) implies that the science of conservation biology came into being with the establishment in the United States less than 10 years ago of the Society for Conservation Biology and, some years later, of its journal, *Conservation Biology*.

What about the journal *Biological Conservation*, established in Britain in 1968 by Nicholas Polunin and "devoted to scientific protection of plant and animal life . . . and to the conservation or rational use of . . . resources . . . for the lasting cultural and economic welfare of mankind"?

And might it not be just a little chauvinistic for David Ehrenfeld to say that conservation biology is what is published in *Conservation Biology*, when the parent journal had been publishing the same for nearly 20 years previously and in its opening issue specifically listed and described the content of 30 disciplines that can be considered relevant to biological conservation?

Finally, doesn't "biological conservation," that is, the biology of conservation, exactly describe what conservation biology is all about, for those who wonder?

ALEXANDER H. HARCOURT
Department of Anthropology, University of California, Davis, CA 95616

In "Conservation biology in the fast lane," Ann Gibbons presents a limited view of a dynamic field. She focuses on a small and fading controversy rather than on the striking interdisciplinary effort that is the larger reality.

No doubt some wildlife biologists have been discomforted by the meteoric rise of the journal *Conservation Biology* and its parent society, but most are not. Distinguished wildlife biologists publish regularly and often in *Conservation Biology*, including a featured column in a recent issue by the president-elect of the Wildlife Society. Contrary to implications in the article, most of our contributed papers are data-rich, including those that use computer models.

Gibbons quotes me, accurately but without context, as saying that "conservation biology is what we print in the journal," implying that I find it hard to define what conservation biology is. I do not. Conservation biology is not defined by a discipline but by its goal—to halt or repair the undeniable, massive damage that is being done to ecosystems, species, and the relationships of humans to the environment. Examination of the contents of the journal should make clear its multidisciplinary but unimotivational nature. Many specialists in a host of fields find it difficult, even hypocritical, to continue business as usual, blinders firmly in place, in a world that is falling apart. They publish in *Conservation Biology*.

Among the numerous disciplines our authors and members represent, there may well be fads. Fads are common in science, as a glance at past (and future) issues of *Science* will show. Yet whatever happens to its particular methodologies, conservation biology itself is not going to diminish until its purposes become unnecessary, or impossible. Neither is likely to happen soon. If "the true test" of conservation biology is the preservation of biodiversity, there will be no shortage of theoreticians and empiricists who feel mor-

ally obliged to suggest and try one conservation method after another as long as the resolution of the issue remains in doubt.

DAVID EHRENFELD
Editor, Conservation Biology,
Department of Environmental Resources,
Cook College, Rutgers University,
New Brunswick, NJ 08903

Greenland Research Projects

As a National Science Foundation–funded principal investigator of a large research project operating in Greenland, I was particularly disturbed by some statements in Joseph Palca's article "Poles apart, science thrives on thin ice" (News & Comment, 17 Jan., p. 276). It is true that logistic support provided to scientists by the U.S. Air Force has been beneficial to scientific projects throughout Greenland. However, it should be noted that the cost of this support is reimbursed to the U.S. Air Force. It is not a "piggyback" free ride.

The current projects in Greenland are not at risk of ending prematurely ("on thin ice") because of the recent decision by the Air Force to withdraw from the Sondrestrom Air Base. The air base is not closing—it is the airport hub for all of Greenland. In fact, the operation of the base has been gradually turned over to the Greenland Home Rule to be operated as a civilian airport. Discussions are continuing between the National Science Foundation and the Greenland Home Rule to ensure that support for science projects will remain available.

It is suggested in the article that little attention has been paid to environmental issues in Greenland. For many years the Danish (and now Greenland Home Rule) authorities have shown their concern about the environment. All research projects must be approved by the Danish Foreign Ministry through the Danish Polar Center, and all aspects of the research proposals including environmental factors are scrutinized before they are approved.

JOHN KELLY
Sondrestrom Incoherent Scatter Radar Project,
SRI International,
333 Ravenswood Avenue,
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Synchrotron Radiation Facilities

Michael Balter's article "Synchrotron light: The third generation" (News & Comment, 8 Nov., p. 794) gives the impression that work on ultrabright synchrotron radiation is limited to high energy sources like the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF) and Argonne National Laboratory's Advanced Photon Source. There are equally important projects under development in the lower energy range. We refer, in particular, to the two ultrabright sources Elettra in Trieste and the Advanced Light Source at Berkeley.

There is an increasing tendency in synchrotron radiation toward specialization. Storage rings in the high electron energy range up to 8 gigaelectron volts are being developed primarily for structural techniques such as diffraction and scattering, whereas lower energy rings will take the lead in spectroscopy. Although not absolute, this specialization is easily recognizable in the spectrum of beam lines for each kind of source.

More than $250 million is being invested in Elettra, scheduled to be commissioned in 1993. The facility is being developed by the Sincrotrone Trieste company, whose president is Carlo Rubbia. The initial program calls for the construction of at least eight beam lines, with the participation of scientists from Italy, the United States, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Croatia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and other countries. Elettra will clearly be in the same class as the ESRF and will be a "leading facility" in Europe.

GIUSEPPE VIANI
Sincrotrone Trieste SCpA,
Padriciano 99,
34012 Trieste, Italy
GIORGIO MARGARITONDO
Institut de Physique Appliqué,
Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne,
CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

Ig Nobel Prize: The Pogo Connection

I was pleased to see the 18 October Briefing (News & Comment, p. 372) about the "Ig Nobel Prize." There was, however, no mention of the debt the prize's organizers owe to the late, great humorist Walt Kelly, who invented the "Ig Noble Peace Prize" (note spelling) back in the 1950s. The original prize was the brainchild of Ignatz Noble, a civic-minded citizen of Fort Mudge, and its spirit was identical to that of the modern upstart.

DAVID C. KOPASKA-MERKEL
Geological Survey of Alabama,
Tuscaloosa, AL 35486–9780

Erratum: In the "NATO International Scientific Exchange Programmes" (31 Jan., p. 577), the item "Cell-free analysis of the functional organization of the cytoplasm" was listed incorrectly. The title should have been "Molecular mechanisms of membrane traffic." The organizer is Dr. Kathryn Howell, American Society for Cell Biology/NATO, 9650 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20814, USA. The date and place are 9–13 May 1992 and Virginia, USA, respectively.