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LETTERS

AIDS Origin

Steve Sternberg's article "HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] comes in five family groups" (Research News, 15 May, p. 966) contains a misattribution that I wish to correct. I did not "claim" during the Stanford University Center for AIDS Research seminar cited by Sternberg, nor do I believe now, that Gabon in particular is the "source of AIDS in the world." The data are far too complex and our findings too preliminary to justify so simple an inference. I explained to Sternberg after he published an earlier version of the article (*1*) why I regarded his decision to single out Gabon as scientifically irresponsible, reminding him of specific evidence presented in my talk that argued against this interpretation. That information could have been included in his *Science* article.

The "acrimonious" debate to which Sternberg refers in *Science* is one that has been unnecessarily rekindled. This is unfortunate at a time when free exchange of information is essential to our efforts to detect, treat, and ultimately prevent a devastating disease. Inquiry into the origin and evolutionary path of HIV is important insofar as it serves these purposes. I am saddened by the fact that my talk on global surveillance of viral forms did contribute to Sternberg's focus on a particular country and its people. Where AIDS arose, as distinct from when and how, is irrelevant to medical science and should not bring any criticism to any country.

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REFERENCES

1. S. Sternberg, *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 February 1992, p. 1.

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Museum Collections: Why Are They There?

I must take exception to the attitudes implicit in the letter of Gary R. Graves and Michael J. Braun (13 Mar., p. 1335). As a museum-oriented systematist, I appreciate why we have systematic collections and what they do. However, I cannot stand by and watch systematics as a science, and natural history museums in particular, literally die on the vine.

All too often museum scientists view museum collections as "irreplaceable" and thus somehow sacred, almost untouchable. The implication is that these collections must be saved from the likes of nonmuseum types who do not have "any real appreciation" of what the collections represent. What are those specimens there for if not to further our understanding of the natural world? Why do we "protect" this material? So after 500 years our descendents can say, "See, we still have . . ."? I worry that we may not have any descendants at all.

Let's face it, our museums have become the backwaters of science. Once upon a time, taxonomy dazzled everyone as cutting-edge investigation. However, since Darwin "the action" has moved elsewhere. If we as museum professionals cannot get our precious collections used more than they are, then we too will pass into extinction.

So I say let our specimens provide protein and DNA samples to molecular biologists; encourage researchers and students to dissect museum materials to further education and understanding; and let our specimens go on public exhibit everywhere and anywhere they will do some good to educate people about nature. We couldn't ask for more!

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Mammalian Diversity in South America

Although it is unfortunate that many nonforest (dryland) habitats in South America have been destroyed or are threatened by human activity, Michael A. Mares (Report, 21 Feb., p. 976) presents a biased justification for their preservation. He concludes that mammalian diversity in the South American drylands exceeds that of other South American macrohabitats and that the drylands contain more families (39 to 36), genera (183 to 151), endemic genera (44 to 10), species (509 to 434), and endemic species (211 to 138) than the lowland Amazonian rain forest. We believe that Mares' conclusions are a consequence of his unorthodox division of macrohabitats.