India's Scorched Earth Policy

The Indian Environment Ministry has ordered the destruction of hundreds of hectares of genetically modified (GM) cotton grown illegally in a western province.

Indian law forbids the sowing of GM seed for commercial purposes, although research plots are allowed with the proper permits. So when the Mumbai-based Maharashtra Hybrid Seed Company (MAHYCO) discovered what appeared to be GM cotton growing in the western state of Gujarat, it complained to government officials. Investigators confirmed that the plants contained a pest-resistance gene from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) that is patented by Monsanto, MAHYCO's parent company.

The Indian government has ordered the burning of illegal genetically modified cotton.

On 18 October, the environment ministry ordered Gujarat officials to torch the crops, and state officials promised to sue the rogue company that sold the seed, Ahmedabad-based Navbharat. One goal: to force the company to repay farmers for the incinerated harvest.

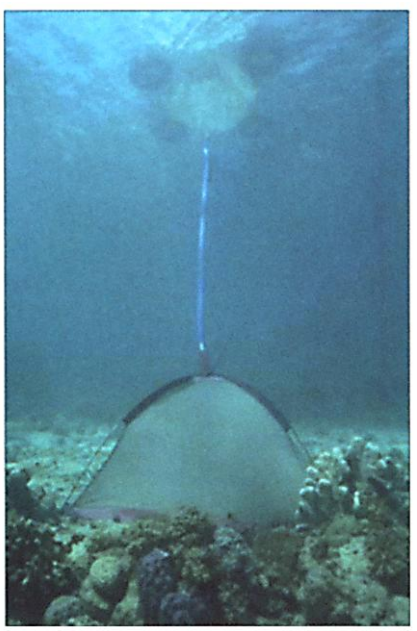
Devinder Sharma, a food policy analyst at the Forum for Biotechnology and Food Security in New Delhi, says that the scorched-earth policy shows the seed industry that the government means business. "If the industry cannot behave," he says, "it has no place in the country."

Reseeding Coral Reefs

Australian marine biologists have developed a promising way to breathe new life into patches of damaged coral reefs.

Rehabilitating reefs hit hard by climate change, pollution, human activities, or predator infestations traditionally has been at the whim of Mother Nature. Marine biologists at the Australian Institute of Marine Science in Fremantle wondered if they could help her along by "reseeding" damaged reefs with millions of coral embryos.

In a pilot study, they scooped up bucketfuls of embryos after a 1997 mass spawning event in Coral Bay, off Western Australia. They then deposited the tiny embryos into floating pools moored over a damaged reef. When the embryos matured, the team pumped them onto tiles on the seabed, which could be easily monitored and defended from predators with mesh tents. In a forthcoming paper in *Marine Ecology Progress*, they report that roughly 23,600 new corals per square meter settled permanently, compared to a natural rate of about 27 per square meter.



Mesh tents to deter predators are part of a new coral-rehabilitation method.

Bette Willis, a marine biologist at James Cook University in Townsville, says the "innovative" technique could eventually help managers restore reefs that once attracted schools of fish—and throngs of tourists.

MacArthur Picks New "Geniuses"

Nine scientists were among the two dozen "geniuses" given surprise financial windfalls by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation on 24 October. As always, none of the winners—each of whom gets $500,000 over 5 years to use as they see fit—knew they were in the running. As a result, foundation officials passing along the good news took precautions: Molecular biologist Norm Pace of the University of Colorado, Boulder, says that, after picking up the phone, he was first asked if he was sitting down. The names of the other winners can be found on the MacArthur Foundation's Web site at www.macfound.org.

Lefties Have Memory Advantage

Lefties—or at least relatives of lefties—may be better than right-handed people at remembering events, according to a new study.

Since the mid-1980s, scientists have known that the two brain hemispheres of left-handers are more strongly connected than those of right-handers. Stephen Christman and Ruth Propper of the University of Toledo, Ohio, suspect that memory for specific events—known as episodic memory—relies heavily on interaction between the hemispheres. Consequently, they reasoned that lefties and righties might differ in episodic memory, but not factual memory—things people know but don't necessarily remember learning—which they say does not rely on interhemisphere interaction.

To test their theory, they asked 62 subjects to watch a series of 55 words flashed on a computer screen. Several minutes later, subjects were asked to write down the words. When errors were subtracted from correct answers, subjects with left-handedness in their families—who may share brain characteristics with their left-handed relatives—achieved an average score of 4.7 compared to 2.7 for those who only had right-handed relatives. There was no such difference in a second task designed to test factual memory.

Sandra Whitelson of McMaster University in Ontario says that the study is "very interesting" because it takes a "complex cognitive ability [episodic memory] and shows that it is associated with a brain structure."

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