NETWATCH

edited by MITCH LESLIE

IMAGES

Feat of Clay

Studying cuneiform, the earliest form of writing, has meant jetting all over the world to pick through far-flung, fragmentary collections. The logistical difficulties have hampered research on cuneiform and ancient languages such as Sumerian, says Robert Englund of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Now the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI), a collaboration between UCLA and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, is building a massive cybermuseum that will give scholars access to much of the world's early cuneiform. Made by incising damp clay with a reed, cuneiform was used across the Near East for more than 3000 years. Available now are high-quality photos of some 3000 pieces belonging to the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin. By 2003, CDLI will have posted caches from other museums that make up about half of the 120,000 known cuneiform tablets from the first millennium or so of writing (about 3200 B.C. to 2000 B.C.).

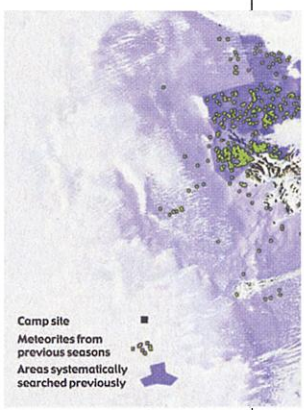
According to Englund, CDLI's co-director, most examples are the ancient equivalents of "those slips of paper you pull out of your pocket at the end of the day," such as bills and receipts. But these quotidian records tell us much more about ordinary life at the time than official accounts do, he says.

early-cuneiform.humnet.ucla.edu

FIELD TRIPS

The Great Meteorite Hunt

Since 1976 scientists have been scouring Antarctica to locate meteorites uncontaminated by earthly bugs and chemicals. Through the journal entries, photos, and other materials posted here, you can follow this year's Antarctic Search for Meteorites (ANSMET) expedition to the frigid but meteorite-rich Darwin Glacier area, 300 kilometers from McMurdo Station. ANSMET scientists have lugged back more than 25,000 lumps of extraterrestrial rubble, and the 1984 crew returned with the controversial meteorite that some researchers claim contains traces of martian life. Members of this year's team of 10—including scientists, mountaineers, and a teacher—will start flying to the glacier on 8 December, and until late January they will be living in two-person tents and exploring on snowmobiles and on foot. Team members will send back regular dispatches and photos via satellite phone and the Iridium network.



The ANSMET journey is just one of many you can peruse at webExpeditions.net, a site that serves as a portal for scientific and adventure trips and that sells software for showcasing them on the Web. For example, check out the results of a just-completed race across Australia in solar-powered cars.

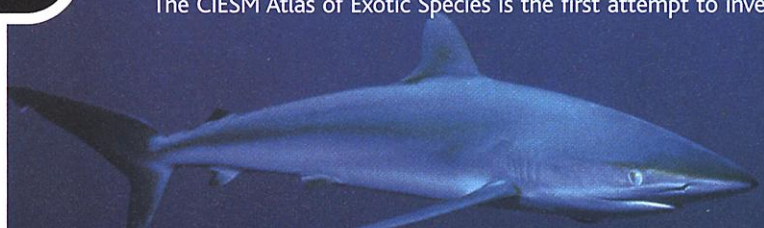
www.webexpeditions.net/ansmet

ATLAS

Mediterranean Invasion

Sun-starved tourists aren't the only outsiders flocking to the Mediterranean. Hundreds of exotic creatures have wandered in from the Atlantic, sneaked through the Suez Canal, or been introduced by people. One invader, the pushy *Caulerpa* alga, is smothering native species in many spots across the Mediterranean, but the effects of most exotics are unknown.

The CIESM Atlas of Exotic Species is the first attempt to inventory



all these interlopers, such as the hard-biting requiem sharks (above, *Carcharhinus falciformis*). The International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Mediterranean Sea, an 80-year-old consortium with members from 22 countries, has posted three volumes covering invasive mollusks, crustaceans, and fishes. Three to five more volumes will go up in the next several years. Written by experts on the groups, the more than 250 accounts detail each species' appearance, ecology, behavior, distribution, entrance route, economic importance, and region of origin.

www.ciesm.org/atlas

EDUCATION

Now Hear This

At Music Acoustics, an ensemble of musically inclined physicists from the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, probes the acoustics of violins, guitars, several kinds of flutes, the human voice, and the didgeridoo (an Aboriginal instrument made from a narrow, hollowed-out tree trunk). Explorations of particular instruments highlight the researchers' own findings and are keyed to backgrounders that cover the physics behind concepts such as standing waves, harmonics, and acoustic impedance. You can read about how friction between violin bow and string leads to such sweet tones, and compare the acoustics of different kinds of flutes. To dig deeper, check out original papers on topics such as how a didgeridoo player makes so wide a range of sounds with such a simple instrument.

www.phys.unsw.edu.au/music

Send great Web site suggestions to netwatch@aaas.org

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