pants of the fundamental equality of the sexes in academic life and to provide women with the self-confidence and positive role models necessary to achieve this equality. That is, after all, the point of women's colleges, which continue to contribute disproportionately to leadership ranks in the United States.

As a future male biology faculty member, who feels privileged to work in a department in which 43% of the faculty are women, I found the conference important in illustrating some of the problems that women face and how those problems might be rectified in the future. It was clear to the sponsors that a conference on "Women in Evolution" would be productive and special, and Graur seems to have missed the point that most conferences are planned by and for "partially bald, middle-aged, pot-bellied individuals".

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Back to nature

SIR — I was puzzled by the suggestion in your leading article "Distrust in genetically altered foods" (*Nature* 383, 559; 1996) that the genetic tailoring of crops is "precisely

the opposite direction" from "increasing demands for 'natural' products". Turning to a familiar paragraph of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), I read:

"A truly extraordinary variety of alternatives to the chemical control of insects is available. Some are already in use and have achieved brilliant success. Others are in the stage of laboratory testing. Still others are little more than ideas in the minds of imaginative scientists, waiting for the opportunity to put them to the test. All have this in common: they are biological solutions, based on understanding of the living organisms they seek to control, and of the whole fabric of life to which they belong. Specialists representing various areas of the vast field are contributing — entomologists, pathologists, geneticists, physiologists, biochemists, ecologists — all pouring their knowledge and their creative inspirations into the formation of a new science of biotic controls."

That seems a fair and farsighted summary of the development of biotechnology in the following three-and-a-half decades, in one of its main fields of application. Subtlety and precision are widespread in nature; it is sad, therefore, to see their use by man stigmatized by *Nature* as unnatural. Molecular biology is part of the "back to nature" movement.

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Making waves

SIR — A. G. Gordon's proposed explanation of the function of the stapedial muscle as a noise protection system triggered by the tactile pressure produced by a blast wave impinging upon the outer entrance of the ear canal is certainly interesting, but unfortunately rather nonsensical from a physical standpoint (*Nature* 382, 665; 1996).

When a pressure wave in a gas becomes sufficiently strong, it steepens into the classic N-shaped wave profile (if one assumes an initially sinusoidal waveform) of a blast, or shock, wave. Shock waves differ from simple sound waves not only in that there is a much larger pressure rise in the fluid associated with their passage, but also in that they travel supersonically. Thus, while a quickly travelling blast wave would indeed arrive at the ear of the listener first, he need not be concerned about the noisy acoustic waves following behind it, as the most dangerous 'noise' from the explosion is the blast wave itself, which would shatter his eardrums (and possibly remove most of his clothing) well in advance of any loud, but conventional, acoustic sounds.

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