

Students unite to create State of the Planet course

SIR — Ours is a world in crisis. We are despoiling our habitat, outstripping our resources and failing to provide an acceptable living standard for much of the world's population. Although academic institutions are equipped to help remedy these problems by informing the leaders of tomorrow, they often fail to do so. Increasing pressure for specialization has led universities to trade breadth for depth in curricula, thereby depriving students of an understanding of complex, interconnected global issues. For example, solutions to our energy crisis span economics, engineering and politics, yet the typical student is exposed to only a portion of this spectrum.

Here, we propose a first step in addressing such shortcomings. We, the undersigned graduate students, have created a campus-wide 'State of the Planet' course at Cornell University under the mentorship of faculty members Tom Eisner and Mary Lou Zeeman (see www.nbb.cornell.edu/neurobio/BioNB321).

Our goal is threefold: to improve understanding of complex issues; to add global context to disciplinary education; and to motivate action and involvement. To this end, we recruited experts, mostly resident faculty members and community leaders, to address the challenges we agreed were paramount.

Administrative support was quick to materialize, as was a pool of enthusiastic participants. We launched the course in January 2007, after campus-wide publicity highlighting its multidisciplinary nature. Our 250 current students come from 45 different majors ranging broadly across the humanities and basic and applied sciences. In lectures, experts familiar with our most pressing global problems emphasize how solutions span disciplines. Students participate in discussion groups led by graduate assistants, where they not only build on ideas presented in lectures, but also set up projects aimed at solving problems.

Mid-semester student evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive, with 93% saying that the course has changed their views on education, career plans and lifestyle, and 95% believing that their peers should also take this course.

Comments include: "This course has influenced my perspectives on almost everything, from the food I eat to how long I leave my computer on" and "The course demonstrates how many different skills and backgrounds can help shape policy that is instrumental for the planet."

We are continuing to expand our course in the hope that it will become a campus-wide requirement. Our vision is that other

universities will adopt similar courses as a curriculum component for all students. We extend an open invitation to like-minded people at other institutions to join us, and others launching parallel efforts, in what we believe will be a modest but fundamental change to university education.

We maintain the optimistic belief that, given the right information, people will change their habits and their world. But the burden is on us, as educators, to motivate this change.

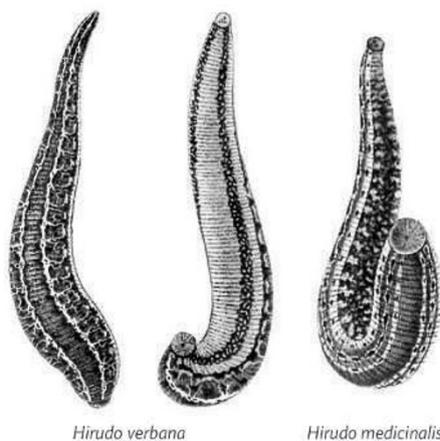
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Leeches underline the need for linnaean taxonomy

SIR — Your Research Highlight 'Identity crisis' (*Nature* 446, 834; 2007) notes that DNA barcoding data revealed that most commercially available medicinal leeches marketed as *Hirudo medicinalis* are actually *H. verbana* and that these annelids are distinct species. During past decades, they have been regarded as 'colour variants' of *H. medicinalis*, a widely distributed European species.

However, linnaean taxonomists distinguished between the two species in



the eighteenth century. On Plate 10 of Georges Cuvier's book *Iconographie Du Règne Animal* (Baillière, Paris, 1829), shown here, the medicinal leech *H. verbana* Carena, 1820 is depicted in dorsal and ventral views, and is juxtaposed to its sister taxon, *H. medicinalis* Linnaeus, 1758.

These drawings show the characteristic, species-specific pigment patterns of both 'leech varieties' in remarkable detail. Cuvier's original figures are of the same quality as recently published photographs of these blood-sucking annelids, which do not

interbreed in captivity.

This case study illustrates the significance of the work of traditional systematists, as highlighted in your Editorial 'The legacy of Linnaeus' (*Nature* 446, 231–232; 2007). Linnaean taxonomy is the science of classification of organisms based on diverse character sets. DNA barcoding can supplement this, but cannot replace it.

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Slang's not so slick when you remember its origins

SIR — As African-Americans and as scientists, we are appalled and disappointed in your News Feature 'Pimp my antibody' (*Nature* 446, 964–966; 2007), which summarizes recent developments in antibody therapy. Despite your misguided attempt to be humorous and socially 'hip', we are dismayed at the cavalier use of the word 'pimp' in a scientific journal, especially one as reputable as *Nature*.

A pimp is defined as a person who controls and exploits a prostitute. Unfortunately, urban/hip-hop culture (and increasingly, mainstream American culture) has embraced the flamboyant, vulgar and misogynistic pimp lifestyle. This has led to a new, related meaning of the term 'to pimp'. However, no amount of manipulation can remove this term from its immoral origins. That such a headline appeared in *Nature* indicates the extent to which our society has become desensitized to such imagery. Use of this term in a scientific context is highly inappropriate, because it could be seen as endorsing such a lifestyle.

Although most scientists desire their work to be understood and appreciated by the average non-scientist, inclusion of such offensive slang only degrades the article and the science it describes.

We are especially concerned about the use of such language in an international journal. The United States' multifaceted culture has global influence, but this is one aspect that should not be spread and legitimized. *Nature* should continue to inspire scientific discovery and inform the international scientific community of noteworthy progress, without promoting disrespectful and demeaning imagery.

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Science publishing issues of interest to authors are regularly featured at Nautilus (<http://blogs.nature.com/nautilus>), where we welcome comments and debate.