

# correspondence

## First-year ecology

SIR,—Although I sympathise with many of the sentiments expressed by Dowdeswell and Potter (October 2) it seems to be that some of their difficulties could be overcome by giving up the search for “natural” habitats (which hardly exist in Britain) and instead concentrating on the immediate surroundings. Take, for example, the ordinary suburban garden. Its high diversity of plants supports an immense variety of animals (most of them insects) and an array of ecological situations reminiscent of tropical rain forest. Virtually all the principles necessary for a first-year ecology course can be demonstrated and investigated in a garden. There is no shortage of material and an imaginative ecologist is soon able to find examples of what he wants.

There are populations of aphids, ladybirds, earthworms, and woodlice for practical work in population ecology. There are intricate food webs centred around every plant and tree. The onion bulb fly, the two-spot ladybird, the peppered moth, and a host of others, can be used as examples of the gene as an element of continuity in populations. I think that the trouble is that rather little is known and published about the ecology of gardens. Research money, as we all know, has gone to the study of “natural” areas and farmland and gardens have been dismissed by some ecologists as biological deserts, which is a pity, for here is a vast expanding resource invaluable to teacher and conservationist alike. Indeed the fact that so little is known should be exploited in the development of a spirit of inquiry among first-year students. Finally, although I would not dispute the value of simulation experiments and visual aids I remain sufficiently old-fashioned to believe that direct contact with nature is better.

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## Deterioration

SIR,—Whereas the quality of the scientific contributions to *Nature* remains uniformly of the highest calibre, I have noticed over a period of several years a steady deterioration in the quality of editorial contributions.

A recent example (August 21) is the

astonishing revelation that the old Chinese had discovered relativity, galaxies, perhaps pulsars and X-ray stars. Surely the author should re-read his classics to find out that, far from being 1,300 years behind, western thought was in fact several hundred years ahead of these Chinese speculations.

In Lucretius's *De Natura Rerum* (about 55 BC), for example, we find also ideas about empty space (“All nature as it is in itself consists of two things—bodies and the vacant space in which they are situated”, Book I, 418) and about time and space (“It must not be claimed that anyone can sense time by itself apart from the movement of things”, Book I, 460). All this was preached by Democritus in the fifth century BC, but many other examples of anticipations could be found in the writings of Greek philosophers.

I fear that the review article in question is indicative of a spirit of masochistic depreciation of science in general and Western culture in particular, which is regrettable in the offices of so prestigious a scientific journal. Many readers will also remember that ample space was given to an Indian journalist for a vicious attack against the USA and the WHO, and that only several months later did the editor feel obliged to shed some crocodile tears in an editorial more designed to whitewash himself than to put things right.

Yours faithfully,

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## Collectors' Code

SIR,—In recent years there has been a good deal of comment on the remarkable zeal shown by some American bird and egg collectors, which led to much discussion at the XVI International Ornithological Congress in Canberra last year (*Nature*, 248, 543; 249, 793; *New Scientist*, 64, 734; 1974). The leading American learned society, the American Ornithologists' Union, set up an *ad hoc* committee under the eminent conservationist John Aldrich to consider the whole matter, and they have now produced a lengthy report.

After emphasising the number of birds killed by hunters and pest-control agencies and the need for scientists to have adequate freedom to

obtain specimens, with which few reasonable people would argue, it ends by advocating some relaxation of local controls, on which it is difficult to comment without more knowledge of the local situation, and proposing a “Code of ethics for collectors and capturers of birds” with which few can disagree and doubtless most will warmly welcome. Since you were at one time very helpful with this campaign, and since the code surely deserves careful study by members of many disciplines throughout the world it may be useful to reprint it:

- The privileges of a collecting or capturing permit shall be used only to obtain specimens for justifiable scientific or educational purposes.
- Collect or capture specimens only from those populations or species that can sustain the loss of individuals.
- Collect or capture only those specimens that are deemed necessary and that can be properly cared for or prepared.
- Exercise the greatest care in recording accurately the maximum amount of relevant data for all specimens obtained.
- If live birds are collected, maintain them under humane conditions with high standards of health and sanitation.
- Collect with the aim of making available all relevant data obtained from specimens, either through publication or by giving access to the data.
- Abide by all stated regulations, including the use of authorised permits to collect, capture, import, export and trans-ship specimens.
- Notify the appropriate local authorities of plans to collect or capture birds in areas under their jurisdiction.
- Identify yourself and your purposes to those who may witness your collecting or capturing in order to inform them of the validity of your activities.
- Be as judicious and humane as possible in collecting and capturing activities, taking care to respect the rights, interests, and feelings of others.
- Regard the privilege to collect or capture birds as a trust in the pursuit of science; it should never be flaunted.

Yours faithfully,

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