

Cover: choosing the right gecko is a sticky business

SIR — Being a herpetologist, I am excited to see a reptile or amphibian prominently displayed on the cover of *Nature*. Such was the case with the 19 July 2007 cover, featuring a Leopard Gecko (*Eublepharis macularius*) clinging to a mussel.

My excitement was tempered, however, when I realized that the wrong species of gecko had been used to draw readers' attention to a Letter describing a new reversible wet/dry adhesive (H. Lee, B. P. Lee and P. B. Messersmith *Nature* **448**, 338–341; 2007).

This “hybrid biologically inspired adhesive” was developed by combining the adhesive properties of microscopic gecko-footpad hairs with wet adhesive proteins found in mussels. The large size of the Tokay Gecko (*Gekko gekko*) has made this species a model organism for most studies detailing the adhesive properties of the microscopic footpad setae in geckos. However, not all geckos are created equal. One clade of geckos, the Eublepharidae, lack these keratinous hairs (G. Underwood *Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.* **124**, 469–492; 1954) and, unfortunately, the Leopard Gecko used on the cover is a eublepharid.

The technological advances of this adhesive research were only possible following detailed descriptions of gecko and mussel morphology and physiology. This seemingly trivial case of transposed taxa on the *Nature* cover emphasizes the need for all of us to have a much better grasp of the biology and natural history of the animals we work with, rather than of a small portion, or in this case, a toe.

Travis LaDuc

Texas Natural History Collections, Texas Natural Science Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 10100 Burnet Road, Austin, Texas 78758, USA

Cover story may obscure the plane truth

SIR — Should *Nature* use deceptive photographs for cover illustrations?

On the front of the 2 August 2007 issue, several photographs have been cobbled together to depict “three stacked, autonomous, unmanned aircraft” taking atmospheric measurements. Besides the disagreement in ambient lighting between the clouds and the aircraft, it is clear that the top and bottom craft are the same images, right down to the same flat-bottomed tyres, presumably extracted from a photograph taken on the ground. If these two craft were actually flying in tight formation, they were miraculously caught at the instant they

crossed the path of the middle craft flying at an appreciably different angle.

For photographs, scientific journals now go to some length to ensure that what appears within their pages genuinely represents the claims of the authors. With a tad more creativity, eye-catching covers can be made without sacrificing truth in journalism.

Lawrence Sincich

Beckman Vision Center, University of California, San Francisco, 10 Koret Way, San Francisco, California 94143-0730, USA

The cover caption should have made it clear that this was a montage. Apologies — Editor, *Nature*.

Researchers' ethical duties are not to be outsourced

SIR — Your News Feature ‘Trial and error’, on the problems with research ethics committees designed to establish whether a proposed experiment is ethically sound (*Nature* **448**, 530–532; 2007), presents avoidance of liability and the desire to retain power as the main reasons why institutions favour local control over centralized review. But institutions are ethically, not just legally, responsible for what happens to human subjects under their care.

Research is a suspect activity designed to advance knowledge, not benefit individuals. This does not denigrate its importance but rather reminds us why experiments involving humans are regulated differently from other kinds of research, and more heavily.

If a central institutional review board says it's fine to enrol patients into a project, this does not mean that the institution involved can ignore its obligation to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects in its facility.

Any institution that outsources its ethical responsibilities towards subjects should not be allowed to conduct research on human beings.

Leonard H. Glantz

Department of Health Law, Bioethics and Human Rights, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts 02118, USA

The Vietnam War added a motive to go on studying

SIR — Tony Dahlen's obituary (*Nature* **448**, 268; 2007) comments that Dahlen “could have graduated early in 1968, but decided to satisfy his broad interests by spending a further year sampling courses in other areas”.

Another reason may have been to avoid being drafted into the armed forces and the Vietnam War. The law provided a deferment so long as you remained in an educational

programme. On reaching the age of 26, you were excused on the grounds of age.

Back in the 1960s, American men born in the 1940s were well-advised to stay in school. I know, because I should have done so: getting my PhD at 25 in 1969 meant I got drafted.

F. Christian Thompson

Systematic Entomology Laboratory, ARS, USDA, Smithsonian Institution MRC-0169, Washington DC 20013-7012, USA

Starstruck science should appreciate philosophy

SIR — As French researchers who are convinced of the need for university reform, we read with interest your News story on the reform plans of the new French government (‘French universities to gain control’ *Nature* **448**, 113; 2007). We were surprised, however, that you seem to take for granted that a ‘star’ biologist ought to earn more than a philosopher of the same seniority level.

Are biologists compared with philosophers because it's assumed that there are no stars in philosophy? Or is philosophy thought to be of less value than biology as an academic endeavour? We are keenly aware of the achievements and promise of biology, but we think it would be counterproductive to relegate philosophy to a secondary status.

Although its contribution is difficult to quantify, philosophy has proven its usefulness to science in several ways: as a source of inspiration and new concepts, as an invaluable critic and as a conduit between scientists and the general public. For example, consider the fertile interplay among several branches of contemporary philosophy and current neuroscience.

There are, of course, good reasons for a state to invest more money in a field such as biology than in philosophy. Indeed, in France, much higher funding for biology is reflected in a larger number of teaching and research positions, dedicated laboratory funding and so on.

But paying ‘star’ biologists higher salaries is debatable for several reasons — not least because, by the time many scientists are recognized as stars, their period of productivity is largely over.

French universities face numerous problems: gross underfunding, laws against selecting students and detachment from the private sector, to name a few. But we would argue that the creation of a star system, among researchers or among disciplines, is not the most urgent necessity.

Mark Wexler*, **Stéphanie Dupouy†**

*Laboratory of Perceptual Psychology, CNRS, and Université Paris Descartes, 45 rue des Saints-Pères, 75006 Paris, France

†Department of Philosophy, École Normale Supérieure, 45 rue d'Ulm, 75005 Paris, France