

Fantasy reference list leads to the sack

What's in a name? Hui Liu, assistant dean of the medical school at Tsinghua University in Beijing, got his job after submitting a résumé that cited, among other things, a paper by "H. Liu" in the *Journal of General Virology*. He lost his job last month when the university learned that the paper was written by Hong Liu, a researcher at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York.

The school was told of the problem last November by Shi-min Fang, a San Diego-based biochemist whose home page is a popular place to post rumours of scientific fraud. Following up an anonymous tip-off, Fang says he investigated Liu's résumé, which had been posted on Tsinghua's website. "I found that several papers were either non-existent or belonged to somebody else," Fang says.

The university's investigation led to Hui's dismissal.

Japan tempts young lovers with science magazine

Japan's science ministry has unveiled its latest strategy to combat a declining interest in science among young people: a free magazine aimed at couples on hot dates.

Last week, the ministry issued 1.1 million copies of a 16-page pamphlet called *Science Walker* (pictured), which will be tucked into *Tokyo Walker* and distributed free at train stations and convenience stores.

The cover features a young couple, along with catchphrases such as "Science that couples can enjoy together". Topics for couples to discuss include the technology of a German football stadium, sports shoes with built-in sensors to check walking speed



Ancient optical illusion is easy on the eye

D. SILVERMAN/GETTY

This Roman mosaic is proving to be a hit with neuroscientists as well as archaeologists. Unearthed last November at Megiddo prison in Israel, the mosaic is on the floor of a Christian church dating back to the third or fourth century AD.

The diamonds in the corners of the image can be seen as three-dimensional cubes that either cut in to, or stand out of, the framed border, an effect known as ambiguous or bistable perception.

Similar optical illusions can be found in mosaics from various regions of the Roman Empire, but the Israeli find is a particularly fine example of the phenomenon, say cognitive



neuroscientists and art history buffs Eric Altschuler of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Newark, and Alex Holcombe of Cardiff University, UK.

and ground condition, and science cafes where people can chat with leading scientists. Couples going out to dinner might enjoy stories about the high-tech freezing methods used to ensure that tuna at sushi restaurants is kept fresh and palatable.

The ministry is waiting for public feedback before deciding whether to continue with the pamphlets.

Researchers put a price on the value of insects

What are insects worth? How about \$57 billion a year in the United States alone?

Two conservation researchers compiled this estimate to stress the value of our six-legged friends. Although putting a cash value on the environment is difficult and controversial, ecologists do it to explain the worth of biodiversity to officials more used to dealing in dollars and cents.

The researchers totted up the economic transactions that would have been impossible without insects (J. E. Losey & M. Vaughan *BioScience* 56, 311–323; 2006). And \$57 billion is a conservative estimate, says Mace Vaughan of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation in Portland, Oregon, one of the paper's authors.

Some wild insects do cause problems, such as disease or crop damage, but overall their value is immeasurable, the authors say. And some of the costs, such as from crop pests, are mitigated by other insects.

Africa's crop crisis has roots in low-fertility soil

Three-quarters of the farmland in sub-Saharan Africa is severely degraded of nutrients, according to a report released

last week. The study, by Julio Henao and Carlos Baanante of the Alabama-based International Center for Soil Fertility and Agricultural Development, shows that some regions lose up to 60 kilograms of nutrients per hectare each year. As a result, cereal production in the region has stagnated at one tonne per hectare, compared with about three tonnes in the rest of the world.

The nutrient-starved soils are one of the major factors preventing the 200 million malnourished people in the continent from growing enough food to eat and sell, development experts said in New York last week. They will discuss possible solutions at the Africa Fertilizer Summit, to be held in Abuja, Nigeria, from 9–13 June.

Merger prompts change in oversight for Bell Labs

Bell Labs, the home of Nobel-winning physics research, may soon be under new ownership.

On 2 April, French telecommunications company Alcatel announced plans to purchase Bell Labs' parent company, Lucent Technologies, for US\$13.5 billion. The merger was approved unanimously by the boards of both companies.

Under the agreement, Bell Labs will continue to be based in Murray Hill, New Jersey (see *Nature* 440, 146–147; 2006). Sensitive research carried out for the government, in fields such as communication and cryptography, would come under the oversight of an independent board of US citizens, says Pat Russo, Lucent's chairwoman. The arrangement is meant to alleviate national-security concerns.

The merger could take 6–12 months to complete and must be approved by both the European Commission and US authorities.