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IN THE NEWS

Highlights of UBC Media Coverage in January 2009

Compiled by Sean Sullivan

The Downside of Face Lifts

A UBC study has found articles in leading women's magazines tend to portray cosmetic surgery as an empowering option for women, despite the lack of scientific consensus that it boosts emotional health.

"Alongside beauty, clothing and diet advice, women's magazines present cosmetic surgery as a normal practice for enhancing or maintaining beauty, becoming more attractive to men and improving emotional health," says author Andrea Polonijo, who conducted the research at UBC as an undergraduate honours thesis in the Dept. of Sociology.

Polonijo examined articles in Canada's five most popular English-language women's magazines: Chatelaine, Cosmopolitan, O: The Oprah Magazine, Flare and Prevention. The study, published in Women's Health Issues journal, was covered by Agence France Presse, Reuters, ABC News, MSNBC, China Post, Yahoo News, National Post, Montreal Gazette and the Edmonton Journal, among others.

It's Not Fish Poop

The digestive systems of fish play a vital role in mitigating climate change by maintaining the delicate pH balance of the oceans, says a UBC study published in the journal Science.

"This study is really the first glimpse of the huge impact fish have on our carbon cycle -- and why we need them in the ocean," said researcher Villy Christensen of the UBC Fisheries Centre.

Christensen estimate of total fish biomass in our oceans, at two billion tonnes, was also noted in the reports by the Los Angeles Times, New Scientist, The Canadian Press, The Associated Press, Reuters and Bloomberg.

The team discovered fish get rid of excess calcium by binding it to bicarbonate, and then excreting it as pellets of calcium carbonate, a chalk-like substance also known as "gut rocks." As the calcium carbonate from these pellets dissolves, it turns the seawater more alkaline, which has relevance for ocean acidification, and is impacted by the ocean's exchange of carbon dioxide (CO₂) with the atmosphere.

Climate Change Taking a Toll on Western Trees

A study co-authored by UBC biogeography Professor Lori Daniels has found the death rates of trees in Western forests have doubled over the past two to three decades, driven in large part by higher temperatures and water scarcity linked to climate change.

The findings, published in the journal Science, examined changes in 76 long-term forest plots in three broad regions across the West, and found similar shifts regardless of the areas' elevations, fire histories, dominant species and tree sizes.

Daniels, who studied 1,200 trees in old-growth forest plots on the North Shore, says climate change is the most likely cause in the dramatic death-rate increase.

The death rate is expected to continue to rise as temperatures go up, leading to sparser forests less able to act as carbon sinks, leading to even more warming.

The study was picked up by the New York Times, Washington Post, Globe and Mail, Bloomberg, The Associated Press, Reuters, BBC News, Scientific American, and the Vancouver Sun

Blogging Through Class

Alfred Hermida, professor at the UBC's Graduate School of Journalism, is a regular commentator on PBS's MediaShift. The website tracks how new media, from weblogs to podcasts to citizen journalism, are changing society and culture.

In January Hermida started requiring his UBC Journalism grad students to keep a blog. He sees the medium as a tool for reflection and critical thinking about events in the headlines: "The blog has emerged as a powerful platform for journalists to provide context, analysis and interpretation, often including behind-the-scenes information that does not fit into the structure of a traditional news story."

Hermida, a founding editor of the BBC News website, was also called upon this month by the National Post to give advice to the CBC on how it can adopt to the demands of an Internet-savvy audience.

"CBC can't just translate what it does for new media, it needs to evolve how it delivers the news," he said. "Newsrooms are notoriously reluctant to change. When change comes, the initial reaction is defensiveness. But BBC changed and so can CBC."

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