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## SCIENCE

### Notebook

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#### DNA Contamination Feared

One of the big fears about genetically engineering crops is that genes that have been spliced into crops could spread to other plants, wreaking havoc with the environment. Now, scientists have found just that occurring in Mexico. Wild varieties of corn growing in remote regions of Mexico have been found to have been contaminated by DNA from genetically engineered plants.

"This is very serious because the region where our samples were taken are known for their diverse varieties of native corn, which is something that absolutely needs to be protected," said Ignacio Chapela of the University of California at Berkeley.

Chapela and David Quist tested wild varieties of corn from four fields in the remote mountainous region of southern Mexico and found four samples that contained a segment of DNA commonly engineered into crops. Two samples contained another segment of DNA also commonly used by genetic engineers, the researchers reported in the Nov. 29 issue of *Nature*. Subsequent tests by the Mexican government confirmed the findings.

Exactly how the contamination occurred remains unknown, but scientists speculated that pollen from the engineered corn must have somehow made its way to the native corn and cross-pollinated with those plants.

"Whatever its source, it's clear that genes are somehow moving from bioengineered corn to native corn," Chapela said.

#### Arctic Ocean Volcanically Active

Contrary to what had been thought, the bottom of the Arctic Ocean remains volcanically active, researchers have discovered.

A team of scientists working aboard the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Healy* and the German research vessel *Polarstern* completed in August a nine-week study of the Gakkel Ridge at the bottom of the Arctic.

The team found irregular pockets of volcanic activity along the ridge, which had

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#### —Correction—

An item in the Dec. 3 Science Notebook misspelled a part of the brain involved in language called the Broca's area.

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been thought to be largely inactive. The team also found sulfide, which is evidence for the existence of hydrothermal vents -- openings in the seafloor that spew hot gases from deep inside the Earth. The recently discovered formations have been found elsewhere to be oases of unusual life on the seafloor.

"These exciting discoveries on Gakkel Ridge pave the way for future expeditions that will map the vents and may discover completely new organisms," Peter Michael of the University of Tulsa, the chief scientist on the expedition, said in a statement announcing the findings last week.

### **Endangered Whales in Bering**

Biologists have discovered a previously unknown population of northern Pacific right whales, which are the most endangered whales.

Cynthia T. Tynan of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Seattle and colleagues found at least five whales in relatively shallow waters in the southeastern Bering Sea, which is far from their traditional feeding grounds. The whales apparently are feeding on a species of crustacean that was not previously known to be their prey, which is also encouraging, the researchers reported in the Nov. 30 issue of Science.

Despite the encouraging news, the numbers are still so low that the whales remain highly vulnerable to extinction, the researchers wrote.

### **Tracing Speech to Brain Part**

Scientists have long been fascinated by why humans are the only species capable of complex language. One explanation has been that, in humans, a part of the brain known as the Broca's area is larger on the left side than on the right.

It turns out, however, that chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas also have the same brain formation.

Claudio Cantalupo and William D. Hopkins of both Emory University and Georgia State University conducted brain scans on 20 chimps, five bonobos and two gorillas and found they had the same asymmetrical Broca's area.

"Our findings suggest that the neuroanatomical substrates for left-hemisphere dominance in speech production were evident at least 5 million years ago and are not unique in hominid evolution," the researchers wrote in the Nov. 29 issue of Nature.

The researchers speculated that in apes this part of the brain may have developed for gesturing and some vocal communication and that it evolved into the ability for speech in modern humans.

### **Fish Catch Reports Questioned**

Contrary to official reports, the number of fish being caught every year around the world may be declining.

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been reporting that the number of fish caught every year has remained stable for the past decade. The reports are based on voluntary tallies from nations around the world.

Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver examined FAO's data and conducted a massive statistical analysis that compared predicted numbers against those that were reported by FAO. The researchers concluded that the tallies are too low, largely because China has been overestimating the number of fish it catches each year.

"The greatest impact of inflated global catch statistics is the complacency that it engenders," the researchers wrote in the Nov. 29 issue of Nature. "There seems little need for public concern, or intervention by international agencies, if the world's fisheries are keeping pace with people's needs. If, however, as the adjusted numbers demonstrate, the catches of world fisheries are in general decline, then there is a clear need to act."

-- Compiled from reports by **Rob Stein**

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