



UNIVERSITY administrators are always keen to boost academics' output. They will surely welcome a paper by Tomáš Grim of the Department of Zoology at Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic, which is due to appear in *Oikos*, the journal of the Nordic Ecological Society (DOI: 10.1111/j.2008.0030-1299.16551.x).

"Despite a plethora of papers on the issue of publication and citation biases," Grim writes in the abstract, "no study has so far considered a possible effect of social activities on publication output."

So he set about remedying this deficit. "I predicted negative correlations between beer consumption and several measures of scientific performance." Uh-oh... "Using a survey from the Czech Republic," he goes on, "that has the highest per capita beer consumption rate in the world, I show that increasing per capita beer consumption is associated with lower numbers of papers, total citations, and citations per paper (a surrogate measure of paper quality)."

You don't say. Knock us down with a feather. What might the consequences be? Feedback glumly predicts the appearance before long of a paper entitled "The possible role of university administrators' attempts to interfere in social activity in accounting for differences in publication output among academics".

For now though, we're off to the pub. In the interests of science, you understand, to test the counter-hypothesis that consumption of whisky improves output.

READER Gregor MacLennan wants to know whether anybody else would get as confused as he was about how to answer the question an airport official

asked him at check-in: "Has anyone put anything into your luggage without your knowledge?"

STUCK for a gift for a mathematically inclined friend? Feedback recommends the Myriorama (myriorama.notlong.com) – a set of 24 cards cunningly designed so that, placed side-by-side in any order, they form one plausible picture. The Myriorama, which costs just £2.99, is in the style of slightly saucy beach postcards.

The website says there are "an astonishing 1,686,553,615,927,922,354,187,744 possible pictures" to be made." And here, of course, the mathematics comes in. John Woods's first thought on seeing the page was that the number of ways of arranging 24 cards should be 24 factorial – which is written 24! and is $24 \times 23 \times 22 \dots \times 2 \times 1$.

But 24! is only 620,448,401,733,240,000,000,000. Then Woods realised you don't have to use all the cards, so the number of arrangements you can make is larger. But what really surprised him was the realisation that the number the site reports is (to the nearest whole number) 24! multiplied by Euler's constant e – which keeps popping up all over the place (*New Scientist*, 21 July 2007, p 38). But why here on a set of seaside postcards?

ONE OF those inevitable questions on a slow day in the laser lab is: can you really zap flies with a laser beam? The answers flew around like flies when somebody asked on the alt.lasers internet newsgroup. Feedback's favourite was posted by Steve Roberts, who replied with what is clearly the voice of experience: it takes "20 to 60 watts of scanning q-switched blue-green light, and don't ask how I know". Roberts reported that he "hated



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sweeping up piles of the dead things in front of the laser booth". The beam "fries the wings, not the shell, so they crash down and wiggle around till they die, which is a long time".

Digging around, Feedback discovers that this is a perennial question. Back in 1999 one contributor to the newsgroup warned: "A system capable of seeing and tracking a bug as it flies around would be quite astonishing. In fact, if you came up with one I'm sure the military would come along and take you and your work and make it disappear." That might explain the Dutch TV advert for the "Starwars Musquito Defense System" which you can see via smds.notlong.com. And that has nothing to do with where Roberts works, nor with the fact that we can't find his message any more. Oh no.

IN THE course of her work, Katy Andrews came across www.fromoldbooks.org, a Canadian website of mostly public-domain images which she thoroughly recommends.

She was, however, taken aback by this offer from the site's owner: "I am Liam at holoweb dot net; let me know if you'd like me to scan specific images, or higher resolution copies, or have any interesting uses for these images, or like them. Tell me what colour socks you are wearing. For faster service include a picture of your ankles."

FINALLY, Steve Laughlin's computer came up with the message: "To continue using Norton Internet Security, please activate within 4915287 days." This, Laughlin quickly worked out, would take him to AD 15465, a wait of 13,457 years. It's nice to know there's no hurry.

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