

Coral and Purls

As quirky environmental statements go, a coral reef made of yarn is hard to beat. The “Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef” is the brainchild of two sisters, Margaret and Christine Wertheim, who co-direct the Institute For Figuring—a Web-based non-profit (<http://theiff.org/>) in Los Angeles, California, devoted to “enhancing the public understanding of figures and figuring techniques.”

The reef started in 2005 as a mathematical recreation, Margaret says. While they were shaping wool into twisting, double-curved hyperbolas, Christine noticed the resemblance to marine life. “She said, ‘Oh my God, they look like a coral reef. We could crochet a coral reef.’” Word of the project spread, and soon groups in New York City, Dublin, Cape Town, and elsewhere were hooking smaller “community reefs” of their own. More than 3000 crocheters have taken part so far, Margaret estimates.

The still-growing mother reef (actually made up of several reefs, including a “Toxic Reef” crocheted from plastic trash bags) will go on display at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., in October.

THEY SAID IT

“The theory of relativity ... is heavily promoted by liberals who like its encouragement of relativism and its tendency to mislead people in how they view the world. ... Virtually no one who is taught and believes relativity continues to read the Bible. ...”

—From the article “Counterexamples to Relativity” in Conservapedia, a Web site (<http://conservapedia.com>) that describes itself as “an encyclopedia written from a conservative viewpoint.” The page includes links to articles on black holes, dark matter, moral relativism, and wormholes, listed under the heading “liberal pseudoscience.”

Heavens on Earth

An ancient bone with notches that may represent a lunar calendar, prehistoric stone tombs in Portugal that point to the rising sun, and the Mauna Kea Observatories in Hawaii are promising contenders for World Heritage status, a new study says.

The study, which has been officially endorsed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), highlights 44 sites and artifacts that mark humankind’s millennia-long fascination with the heavens. Usually, it notes, UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee focuses on what it calls “tangible, immovable heritage,” such as buildings, parks, and railways. But when addressing astronomical heritage, it’s the development of scientific knowledge that is important, not the bricks and mortar, says Thomas Hockey, an astronomer



Megalithic tomb in Portugal.

at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls and a member of the International Astronomical Union’s working group that helped produce the report.

For example, the twin monastery of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in northeast England no longer houses the scientific writings of the

medieval monk Saint Bede, but World Heritage status would recognize the “scholarly activity” that occurred there. Saint Bede’s most influential work, *On the Reckoning of Time*, written at the monastery in about 725 C.E., “became the principal text for early medieval astronomical study,” says the report, which is available online at www.astronomicalheritage.org.

MOUNTAIN MYSTERY

On 8 June 1924, on the slopes of Mount Everest, two British explorers attempting to be the first to climb the peak disappeared, not to be seen again until a 1999 expedition uncovered a long-frozen body. But mountain climbers still debate whether George Mallory and Andrew Irvine made it to the top—or whether they met their deaths first.

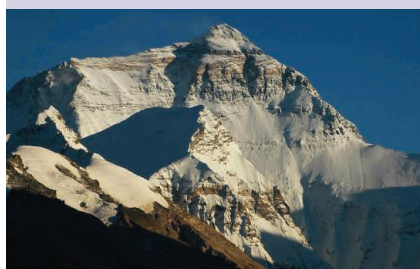
Avid mountaineer G. W. Kent Moore, a meteorologist at the University of Toronto in Canada, was no exception. So he and colleagues pored over base camp records from the expedition, hoping to reconstruct the weather conditions on that fateful day. The crew took daily readings to help them calculate how high they had climbed, and from 6 to 9 June, they recorded a large pressure drop, from 559 to 541 millibars. Although a mountaineer in 1924 wouldn’t have known it, the drop was a sure sign of an approaching blizzard with strong winds, frigid temperatures, and near-zero visibility, Moore and colleagues reported online 2 August in *Weather*. On top of that, the large pressure drop would have meant that there was less oxygen in the air; some climbers have speculated that



Andrew Irvine (left), George Mallory (standing beside him), and other members of the 1924 expedition.

Mallory and Irvine carried too little stored oxygen to reach the 8850-meter summit, and this would only have made matters worse.

And a blizzard does fit with the last sighting of Mallory and Irvine. Supporting mountaineer Noel Odell was heading upward toward their last camp when the clouds parted, allowing him a glimpse of the pair climbing over an obstacle along the ridge. And then, he wrote, the clouds closed in again.



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