

us. Even Gaia could not know what would hit in the future, just as inductive logic's free-range chicken, while noting that the sun has always risen in the past, is oblivious to the glint of the farmer's axe. Gaia could be dealt a fatal blow by a supernova, asteroid, or the collapse of Earth's magnetic field.

*La Tour d'Aigues, France*

## Older but better

*From Fiona Stewart*

You report on a Mozilla Firefox browser plug-in called Lightbeam, designed to reveal the numerous websites which grab data when you browse (2 November, p 23).

However, going a step further would be useful. The old firewall program Zone Alarm Professional version 7 could not only detect all these data grabbers, but also allow you to block them. Sadly, subsequent versions omitted this wonderful privacy feature.

*London, UK*

## Fatal error

*From Ian Mapleson*

Hugh Newbury writes that turning off a self-aware robot would not be considered murder (2 November, p 32).

Surely the more relevant question is how one would respond if, prior to such an act, the robot said: "Please don't turn me off, I don't want to die."

*Edinburgh, UK*



## Nuclear no-no

*From Vernon Barber*

I was very surprised to read in your editorial that nuclear fission reactors are accepted as one of the energy providers that should feature in the UK's energy generation portfolio (9 November, p 3). As has been pointed out before in your magazine, Germany has decided to abandon that approach. The case against nuclear power is overwhelming.

If there was a serious nuclear accident, a large part of the country would have to be evacuated, and might not be safe to live in for at least a generation.

Also, the decreasing cost of alternatives is such that nuclear power will never be able to compete with them financially.

Not least, a nuclear plant would be a relatively easy target for terrorists.

*Westcliff on Sea, Essex, UK*

## Two-way deal

*From Lindsay Robertson*

In his look at a world without online anonymity, Chris Baraniuk considers the effect on behaviour towards another person, if the first person can remain anonymous (26 October, p 34).

I wonder what the behavioural effects would be if, every time someone wanted to record or view my email or phone data, my financial transactions or travel plans, they first had to make it possible for me to trace their real name and address. After all, they're not doing anything wrong, illegal or shameful – are they?

*Palmerston North, New Zealand*

## Save our trees

*From Chrissy Philp*

Hurrah for your look at the benefits of urban trees, so relevant to my own worries about the loss of city foliage (9 November, p 40). At present, I am disturbed by

plans to fell mature poplars on a stretch of the north bank of the river Avon in Bath in the UK to make way for flood prevention measures ahead of proposed housing development.

Last spring, nightingales were singing in these trees, and one tree has been a fishing platform for six cormorants for years. Wandering among these trees feels like being in a forest. Efforts to replace them won't be enough.

*Bath, UK*

*From David Longhurst*

Having just got thoroughly soaked clearing leaves from a blocked drain, I find it hard to believe that trees planted in urban streets prevent flooding.

*Hindhead, Surrey, UK*

## Ancient cancer

*From Tony Waldron*

Further to your look at how common "modern" diseases were in the past (9 November, p 36). I showed some years ago that the age-specific prevalence rates of cancers that involve bone were of the same order of magnitude in the past as they are today.

This finding is in line with the hypothesis that the burden of human cancer has not changed over time, only the manner in which it appears, something determined by, among other things, diet, habits like smoking, and environmental factors.

*London, UK*

## Matthew matters

*From Milton Wainwright*

While it is excellent that Alfred Russel Wallace is at last getting his due credit alongside Charles Darwin for his work on the theory of evolution (9 November, p 48), could I make a plea for the same thing to happen to arboriculturist Patrick Matthew? Both Darwin and Wallace admitted that Matthew beat them to the idea of

natural selection, a fact accepted by Darwin's contemporaries Thomas Huxley and John Tyndall.

Despite this, Matthew is rarely mentioned in popular articles on the history of evolution, and historians also generally ignore him. If Darwin and Wallace could accept Matthew's priority on natural selection, why can't we lesser mortals do the same?

*Sheffield, UK*

## A wee song

*From Cormac Byrne*

Your coverage of the 21-second universal law of urination



(26 October, p 18) reminds me it has been common knowledge on the British music scene for years. The garage act So Solid Crew in their 2001 hit *21 Seconds* were in full agreement with the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

You get a real sense of the artist's bladder frustration in the lyrics: "I got 21 seconds to flow. I got 21 seconds to go... don't gimme no deadline gimme some more time... I got 21 seconds to go". Poetically put.

*London, UK*

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