Steve Solnick

Scientific hubris

An article in Tuesday’s Times declared, “Scientists Urga Triage for Species Beloved Endangered.” In it, Dr. Thomas E. Lovejoy of the World Wildlife Fund is quoted as saying, “We’re already on the threshold of mass extinction of many species. And I thought there ought to be a beeline that we would give us a conscious choice in choosing to save one species after another.” Triage is a wartime system used to allocate medical care to war wounded.

The Greeks had a word for this kind of tele. They called it hubris. It described actions which were generally offensive to the gods. Cases of man overreaching his bounds. Unwarily ego.

It is not hubris for scientists to stretch the bounds of science to its limits. Or even for man to alter his environment. This is the essence of the wonder of science. It is scientific hubris, however, to forget that such achievements are instead extraordinary. That they alter the normal natural chain-of-command.

Wildlife specialists Lovejoy suggested some criteria that scientists might use as they decide which species are worthy of man’s efforts to save them. In light of limited resources for these efforts. They were: a) Biological—genes values and uniqueness of the species; b) Values of the ecosystem the species inhabits; c) Economic—the species’ agricultural, medicinal and industrial worth; d Cultural and esthetic values.

The last two considerations, economic worth and esthetic beauty, are the essence of the hubris here. The Olympics would be impressed with the audacity of the Wildlife Fund.

To The Editor: Steve Solnick, in his provocative columns, “Class of 2000?” or “I wouldn’t want to send my kid here,” takes it as self-evident that MIT students don’t have enough time to “explore and grow.” Maybe it’s true. Or maybe it’s false, but students think it is true, which would amount, of course, to much the same thing. Whichever, the question one must then ask is why. Is there too little real or perceived time? On paper at least, our structure is such as to guarantee students ample time for exploration and growth.

Our credit unit system, which serves excuses to peeples outsiders, has the purposes of constraining faculty to keep demands within bounds and guiding the student to reasonable course load. Perhaps someone will argue that there are 12 unit courses that take more than 12 hours of work a week. But previous subject evaluations too had there been a common perception one recently can’t bear this out. Subjects nearly always fit within their hours and when they don’t, adjustments are usually made. And a student need take only 45 units per semester to graduate in 4 years—even fewer units if the student enters with advanced placement credit, as many do. Certainly 45 hours doesn’t use up all the available time.

But maybe, in some cases, 45 hours of course work doesn’t engage the individual with enough energy to pursue intense alternative activities. Here one must point out that the semester, starting with the Registration Days and ending with the final exams period and including weekends and holidays, occupies only about 40 percent of the year. It’s not as though course work marches relentlessly month after month. After all, there were two big breaks each year and MIT explicitly encourages undergraduates to use some of these breaks to engage in exploration and growth; that’s why the January IAP period is supposed to be all about.

The prominent Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) provides students with yet another way of pursuing individual interests, both within the semesters and without. In this program, students are encouraged and often paid—by the Institute to engage in activities where they can bring their own creative and industrious creativity into play.

There are also a number of regulations, which may or may not be well known, that ease the way for students who need them.

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Halfman calls for GAMIT board clues

To The Editor:

Once again our MIT community has been dimished by the destructive acts of a few who, while seeking the protection of anonymity, attempt to damage the efforts and program of a non-political student activity. The latest shattering of the GAMIT bulletin board on the main concourse was a direct reflection on the MIT community to engage in events where they can bring their own creative and industrious creativity into play.

As an honest attempt to promote a direct and thoughtful exchange of views with the opportunity for some growth and understanding for all concerned, I make the following request: If you observed or participated in the ‘vandalism’ please make yourself known to me so that, with sensitivity, I can try to bring the principals together.

Bob Halman

Faculty Adviser to GAMIT