Release of Earth Data Resumes

The federal government has lifted a hold it had placed after Sept. 11 on the release of data collected to create the most accurate three-dimensional map of the Earth's surface.

The map is being made from 1 trillion measurements of the Earth taken during the Shuttle Radar Topography space shuttle mission in February 2000.

NASA began releasing parts of the map in the summer. But the National Imagery and Mapping Agency halted any additional releases after the terrorist attacks for fear the information could aid future attacks. It also withdrew some data that had been released, including small maps of parts of the United States and military installations.

But the agency notified NASA on Dec. 5 that it could resume making some data available, officials said last week. The scheduled data release will resume, with U.S. images coming first.

Stop Paying Attention

The professional tennis player who double-faults at match point. The pitcher who walks the batter with bases loaded. The ballerina who trips and falls on opening night. Why do experts "choke"? Two psychologists think they have some new clues.

Sian L. Beilock and Thomas H. Carr of Michigan State University were trying to determine if people choke because they are paying too much attention to a task that comes naturally, or because the distraction of a pressure-filled situation causes them to pay too little attention. It appears to be the former.
The researchers trained 54 students to excel in putting a golf ball. The golfers then practiced either under normal conditions, while listening to a taped word test, or in front of a video camera. The idea was that those who practiced in front of a video camera would get used to being self-conscious and would be less likely to choke under pressure.

When the pressure was low, all three groups performed about equally well. But when the golfers were told they had to improve their performance to get a monetary reward, the only ones that putted better were those putting in front of a camera. The others performed more poorly.

The results support the "explicit monitoring" theory of choking, which says that paying too much attention to a well-learned task can worsen performance, the researchers wrote in the December issue of the Journal of Experimental Psychology: General. In addition, it suggests that people can be "immunized" against choking by training them to perform well even when self-conscious, the researchers said.

Classifying by Race, Not Instinct

Racism is not "hard-wired" in the human brain, new research suggests.

Typically, if people get two strangers mixed up, they are more likely to confuse people of the same race than people of different races. That led some to speculate that the tendency to categorize people based on race was a primitive instinct built into our brains.

To test that, Robert Kurzban, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides of the University of California at Santa Barbara and colleagues asked a group of volunteers to watch a video of two racially integrated basketball teams having a conversation and to try to remember who said what.

The researchers found that the subjects in the study were more likely to mix up people on the same team than people of the same race, according to a report in the Dec. 18 Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

That suggests that people tend to group individuals based on their alliances, and not necessarily their race. So racism is not immutable, the researchers said.
"Our subjects had experienced a lifetime in which ethnicity (including race) was an ecologically valid predictor of people's social alliances and coalitional affiliations," the researchers wrote. "Yet less than four minutes of exposure to an alternative social world in which race was irrelevant to the prevailing system of alliance caused a dramatic decrease in the extent to which they categorized others by race."

Crows Tend Leftward

Few creatures other than humans were thought to be either "right-handed" or "left-handed." But new research has found that at least one species of crow also tends to favor one side over another.

Gavin R. Hunt of the University of Auckland in New Zealand and colleagues studied the New Caledonian crows, which use their beaks to fashion tapered tools from long narrow leaves to gather insects. Hunt and his colleagues examined 3,727 tools at 19 sites and found that the crows generally tend to make the tools from the left side of the leaf.

"To our knowledge, this is the first demonstration of species-level laterality in manipulatory skills outside humans," the researchers wrote in the Dec. 13 Nature.

"It has been proposed that right-handedness in humans may be a consequence of the evolution of language, which is also predominantly left-hemispheric. Our results favor the more general possibility that species-level lateralization is an adaptation of complex sequential processing, of which language and right-handedness in humans and stepped-tool manufacture in crows are examples," they wrote.

-- Compiled from reports by Rob Stein

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