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Posted on Mon, Jul. 26, 2004

Gravity maps give data on Amazon drainage

The Dallas Morning News

(KRT) - New maps of Earth's gravity field have revealed how the Amazon drainage basin gains or loses water from season to season.

Large masses of water - such as behind dams, in ice caps, or in underground aquifers - can shift Earth's gravity ever so slightly. Two years ago, NASA launched a pair of satellites called Grace to study these effects, which can reveal how the world's climate is changing.

Scientists based at the University of Texas published some of the first findings from Grace (Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment) in last week's issue of Science. Monthly maps of South America's gravity field show how both the Amazon drainage basin and the neighboring Orinoco wax and wane depending on rainfall.

An extra inch or so of flow in the Amazon can represent as much water as the Mississippi River puts out all year, so keeping an eye on the gravity is a good way to monitor the river's changes, the scientists write.

_ Alexandra Witze

NEW METHOD DEVELOPED FOR READING BODY CLOCK

Never mind the clock on the wall; scientists say they can tell what time your body thinks it is.

Everyone's body operates on about a 24-hour cycle, and studies have shown that some medications are more or less effective at certain points in that cycle. But doctors haven't had a reliable way to gauge at what point any individual is in his or her cycle.

In a report published online last week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, researchers in Japan report that they can pinpoint, within an hour or two, where individuals are in their daily cycle. Pinpointing the time, done so far only in mice, relies on measurements of 168 genes that are more or less active during the 24-hour cycle.

Similar measurements should work in people, the scientists write, and could help diagnose daily rhythm disorders or lead to better administration of drugs.

_ Sue Goetinck Ambrose

DRUG MAY PROTECT SKIN BY REDUCING TANNING TIME

Doctors may one day be able to write prescriptions for a tan.

Human tests of an experimental drug called MT-1 suggest that it shortens the tanning times for both UV-B rays and direct sunlight.

The drug's investigators describe MT-1 as a "superpotent derivative" of the natural hormone that darkens skin under UV exposure. They aren't necessarily hoping for a new cosmetics line, but for a drug that might protect particularly vulnerable people from the sun's skin-damaging rays.

The study had three parts. First, eight volunteers received either daily injections of MT-1 or of saline, and had their necks exposed to UV-B light for 10 days. Next, the drug dosage was doubled for 10 days, and study subjects had part of their buttocks irradiated during and after the injections. Finally, volunteers exposed half their backs to sunlight periodically over four weeks, with half the volunteers receiving the drug. The study was sponsored by the Australian company developing the drug.

The results, reported last week in the journal Archives of Dermatology were golden, say researchers from the University of Arizona in

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Tucson. MT-1 appeared to reduce the amount of sun exposure required for tanning by half, with only minor side effects such as nausea and face flushing. These early studies, however, were primarily conducted to gauge the drug's safety. Later tests will focus on effectiveness.

_Laura Beil

SCIENTISTS SAY LISTERIA A TOUGH FOE AT FOOD PLANTS

Listeria, a bacterium that causes a sometimes-lethal infection, seems especially tough to terminate once it turns up at a food retailer or processing plant.

Cornell University researchers visited 50 retail food stores where New York state health officials had found listeria on foods including bologna, raw beef, hummus and cheese in routine inspections.

Even as much as a year later, 17 of these stores tested positive for the persistent pathogen, the scientists wrote in the latest Journal of Food Protection. The scientists also visited seven food-processing plants where inspectors earlier had found listeria. The Cornell team found the bacteria in three of the plants.

The results suggest that listeria's hardiness will continue to challenge public health officials trying to track transmission of listeriosis, the disease caused by the bacteria. "Our knowledge of the contributions of food contamination with listeria at retail, at restaurants, and at home is extremely limited," the scientists write.

Each year in the United States, listeriosis infects about 2,500 people, 20 percent of whom die, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports. Pregnant women, newborn children and adults with weakened immune systems are especially at risk. Pasteurization and cooking kill the bacterium.

_Geoff Koch

(Writers are staff members of The Dallas Morning News. Write to them at: The Dallas Morning News, Communications Center, Dallas, TX, 75265.)

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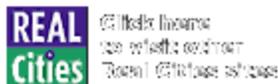
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