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Department of Geography  
 U of W-Madison  
 August 19, 1985

Dear Colleague:

Welcome back! I hope you have all had a most enjoyable and rewarding summer. I take the liberty of extending this welcome because I have been a homebody: except for a couple of short trips I stayed in Madison. I think the one other faculty colleague who stayed behind is our esteemed chairman, who doubles as Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds. I think Jim stayed behind to make sure that the asbestos, falling plasters, and noise are not going to wipe out the faculty, staff, and students.

Dan Muhs, as you know, is leaving us for full-time research with the USGS. This is sad news for the department. While he was here to pack, we had a chance to chat about "time off" at academic and research institutions. At the USGS, Dan says, he will get one month off--one whole month in which to enjoy the mountains and the other good things of life. In the university, by contrast, we get a week off perhaps--two weeks at the most. Somehow "research" (interpret it any way you like) never quite leaves us alone. Except for short breaks, we always feel we ought to be doing something.

So what have I done this summer? Alas, very little. I have been consuming. That is, I have been reading. I have been stuffing myself with food from the supermarket. Before I can digest the food I feel bloated and grossly self-indulgent. I also suspect that some of the food I have eaten contains too much cholesterol--it is too rich for me--and that others are just fiber, useless from a nutritional point of view. Why doesn't some authoritative body provide me with a Consumer's Guide, a handbook that will tell me what to eat? But I can't find any such guide in the supermarket. To the contrary, the supermarket seems to have arranged its goods so as to tempt, deliberately, the weak-willed. I find myself picking cans off the shelf here, there, and everywhere

We eat to live; we consume to produce. I have consumed all summer. What will I produce? Probably nothing. But I am consoled by the following idea. The brain is different from a computer. With a computer, as the saying goes, "garbage in, garbage out." With a brain, garbage does get in--an enormous amount of it. The brain takes in consciously or subconsciously an incredible amount of information--everything from the chemical ingredients on the suntan bottle to the latest theories on streamflood erosion. But what comes out may be (just may be) science or poetry! So, I remain hopeful. All summer I have been giving the following commands to my brain (Apple IIe model): Control load and control save. Before long I shall give the order: Control P, NP, Return! Who knows what will happen? I certainly don't.

One thing I have programmed into my brain this summer is the review of a technical book on the Giant Panda. The reviewer points out that PR has provided the Giant Panda with an image that is totally out of line with reality. In reality, the panda is a lazy animal who

spends an incredible number of hours eating bamboo shoots. It has to do this because, although the panda is a sort of a bear and hence a carnivore, it has given up eating meat in favor of a vegetarian diet. Its intestines, however, are not suited to sucking nutrients out of the vegetable fibers. Therefore, the poor panda has to eat just about all the time in order to get adequate value from the food. Corollary? He shits all over the place. The authors of the book keep on using the word "adaptation"--how the Giant Panda have adapted to a diet of bamboo shoots in western China. The reviewer questions the loose use of the word "adaptation", which somehow always carries the implication of "success." So long as any Giant Panda survive, one can claim that the species has successfully adapted, thus rendering the term nearly meaningless.

Consider this. Is the human species well adapted to the earth? The answer is yes. Of course, we are beautifully adapted. After all, there are 4.8 billion of us. The true answer is: yes, we are beautifully adapted--you can't argue about numbers-- until the hour after someone pressed the button that unleashed the nuclear holocaust.

With warmest regards,

YFT

PS. Letter is reproduced at the author's, rather than the department's, expense.