Boys Take Energy

A study of 18th and 19th century Finnish farmers and fishermen provides new evidence that nature finds it more costly to produce the male mammal.

Some studies have suggested that having sons takes more out of a mother, as shown, for example, by lower birth weight in succeeding offspring. Now a multigenerational analysis by researchers at the University of Sheffield in the U.K. indicates that being next in line to a brother reduces one’s reproductive success.

Evolutionary ecologist Ian Rickard and colleagues, using data from population registers of Lutheran churches, tracked the births of children and grandchildren of 653 women born between 1709 and 1815. They found 1653 surviving children born after their mothers had produced a son. These people were significantly less likely to have offspring—62%, versus 67% for those born after a sister—the researchers report this week in the Journal of Evolution and Human Behavior.

Ray Blanchard, a psychologist at the Clark Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto, Canada, says the study supplies new evidence that “older brothers, more than older sisters, influence certain traits in later-born siblings, and these effects are biological in nature.” But what those effects are is unclear. Blanchard has found that men with older brothers are more likely to be homosexual—a trait he thinks could be related to a maternal immune response to the Y chromosome. The Sheffield researchers, however, believe the older-brother effect applies to both sexes and has something to do with “a higher physiological cost of producing sons.”

Name That Rover

Snoopy? Transcendence? Grawp? U.S. students aged 5 to 18 are invited to try naming the next Mars rover, to be launched next year, in a contest sponsored by NASA together with WALL-E, a Walt Disney movie robot.

The last two rovers were named Spirit and Opportunity. The next, a six-wheeled car-sized vehicle, will have multiple chores roving over, reaching for, lasering, photographing, hammering, sniffing, cooking, and analyzing rock. Students have to accompany their suggestion with an essay explaining why it’s an apt choice. The deadline is 25 January 2009, with the winner to be announced next April. For more information, go to marsrovername.jpl.nasa.gov.

This Is Your Brain Online

Elsevier is going to dump all its brain atlases onto the Internet. The science publisher has gotten together with the Allen Institute for Brain Science in Seattle, Washington, to create an online version of its extensive neuroanatomy tomes.

Called the BrainNavigator, the program will ultimately feature 3D images of more than 700 models of rat, mouse, monkey, and human brain sections. Researchers can view specific slices in 3D, micrograph, and 2D mapped images. They will also be able to upload and share their own experimental results.

Program developers solicited feedback from researchers at a rollout event at the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., last week during the 2008 meeting of the Society for Neuroscience. The project, to launch early next year, will take such atlases “to the next level,” eclipsing other efforts in its scope and breadth, says Mike Hawrylycz of the Allen Institute. “It’s a nice prototype,” says Pavan Ramody, a graduate student at Harvard University who attended the meeting. “It’s not quite the Human Genome Project, but it’ll get there,” he says, given rapid advances in the exploding field of neuroscience.

The Manly World of European Science

The United Kingdom is the big winner—and women the major losers—in the first round of grants for established (“advanced”) researchers awarded by the European Research Council (ERC).

The results, released earlier this month, show that researchers from the U.K. will get more than 16% of the 275 grants, which are worth up to €3.5 million each. The top 10 nationalities are shown at left. (Some will do research in other European countries.)

Women, who made up 14% of the applicants, will get only 12% of the grants. “That was very disappointing to all of us,” says ERC Vice-President Helga Nowotny, although she notes it reflects the low number of female full professors in Europe. ERC is considering remedies, Nowotny says, such as asking review panels to give candidates with unconventional career tracks special consideration and encouraging women to apply. Yet she says the agency is determined to retain excellence as the sole criterion for grants: “We cannot and will not undertake affirmative action.”