

Shifting ground

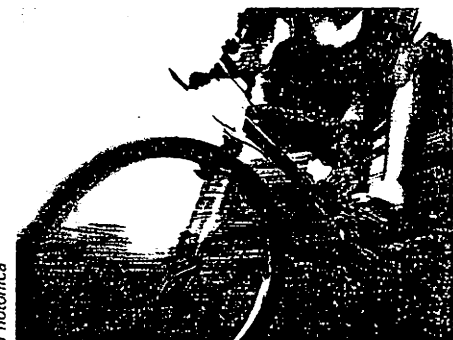
No civil engineering project should go ahead in Europe without a geological survey, according to the European Federation of Geologists. At a meeting in Cologne this month, the federation claimed that the recent toxic spill in Spain, caused by a collapsing dam, and deaths from landslides in Italy could have been averted if planners had taken local geology into account.

The federation wants the European Commission to introduce a directive to make surveys compulsory across the European Union.

On yer bike

You don't need to go down to the gym and have a workout to keep fit—you only need to cycle to work, according to a study by the Transport Research Laboratory in Crowthorne, Berkshire.

Researchers at the TRL monitored the fitness of 77 people who took up cycling. Their maximum oxygen uptake, a good measure of aerobic fitness, increased by an average of 11 per cent after only eight weeks—similar to the improvements seen in people starting other fitness programmes.



Photonica

Reynard vs the devil

Tasmania has been put on red alert by a fox. On the Australian mainland, foxes have decimated populations of small marsupials. The island state was fox-free until earlier this month when one hitched a ride from Melbourne on a ship that berthed at Burnie in northern Tasmania. The animal has since been seen in Wynyard, 20 kilometres away.

If the fox is a pregnant female and a population becomes established, the Tasmanian devil, unique to the island, could be threatened. Beagles will be used to track the fox, and sharpshooters have been authorised to shoot to kill.



Bruce Coleman

On the brink: Java's scarce rhinos have some even rarer cousins in Vietnam

Jungle survivor

Vietnam's unique rhinos are facing extinction

A CENSUS of footprints has revealed that Vietnam hosts a subspecies of rhinoceros that was once thought to be extinct.

The animals are Javan rhinos, but a different subspecies from the only other surviving population, in Java's Ujung Kulon National Park. The census suggests that the Vietnamese population is down to just five animals. "They can only survive for two or three years unless action is taken," says Nico van Strien, a Dutch zoologist who works for the International Rhinoceros Foundation, which organised the census.

The Javan rhino, an elusive animal that lives in dense forest, was once widespread across Southeast Asia. Between 50 and 60 animals survive in Ujung Kulon. But the Javan rhino was thought to be extinct on the Asian mainland until 1990, when rhinos were spotted along the Dong Nai River in the central highlands of Vietnam. At that time there were thought to be up to 20 animals. But no one was sure whether

they were Javans, or the smaller Sumatran rhino—which was also once common in the region, but is now thought to be extinct on the mainland.

Last month, three teams made two 10-day treks into the Cat Loc Wildlife Reserve looking for rhino tracks. The prints show the animals to be Javan rhinos, but they are only about two-thirds the size of the animals found in Ujung Kulon, which belong to the subspecies *Rhinoceros sondaicus sondaicus*. This means they are likely to be the last remaining survivors of a different subspecies, *Rhinoceros sondaicus annamiticus*. The only way to confirm this would be to examine one of the animals' skulls.

The bad news is that the census found tracks from only five rhinos. "You always miss a few. But in such a small area there won't be more than one or two more," says van Strien.

In 1990, there were about 50 000 hectares of rhino habitat in Cat Loc. Despite its status as a wildlife reserve, farmers are encroaching and today there are only 6000 hectares suitable for rhinos. The animals are also threatened by poachers.

Tiny populations have come back from the brink in the past, says Tom Foose, who heads the International Rhinoceros Foundation. Nepal's Indian rhinos recovered from just 20 to today's population of around 500. "It's worth the effort to perform whatever heroics are necessary to save these animals," Foose says.

Vietnam's Forest Protection Department and the World Wide Fund for Nature plan to increase the number of anti-poaching patrols. But if that doesn't work the animals may have to be moved to the nearby Cat Tien National Park, a larger and better forested area.

Stephanie Pain NSP

On the trail of the Javan rhino

