Hurricanes cause ecological harm

A study by marine scientists at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and other institutions suggests effects such as enhanced growth conditions for potentially harmful algae, low oxygen levels in bottom waters, and declines in some fisheries lasted as long as three years after a storm such as 1999's Hurricane Floyd. The study leader, Hans Paerl Kenan, professor of marine and environmental sciences at UNC's Institute of Marine Sciences, said the period of elevated hurricane activity that began in 1995 added yet another stressor to waterways already affected by man-made nutrient, over-enrichment and degradation of fisheries habitat. With another above-normal hurricane season predicted for the north Atlantic this year, the study points to the need for adaptive ecosystem management approaches to accommodate these large-scale events over long time spans, said Paerl.

Don't give up sun block just yet

A U.S. dermatologist says research on a sunburn-preventing South American fern extract is very promising, but the jury's still out. The extract, Polypodium leucotomos, recently became available in the United States as a dietary supplement. Israel-based Teva Pharmaceutical Industries sells the fern extract under the brand name Heliocare. The cost is about $60 for 60 capsules. Two small but rigorous studies have shown Heliocare reduced sunburn and genetic changes that cause skin cancer. But the caution, U.S. experts say, is that the studies were funded by Industrial Farmaceutica Cantabria -- the Spanish maker of the extract sold in the United States. It's very promising, but the jury is still out says James Spencer of New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine. In the meantime, he and others recommend that people wanting to avoid sunburn continue to use products that block the sun's ultraviolet rays.

Robot see, robot do

Tokyo University Institute of Industrial Science's painting robot "Dot-cyan" demonstrates its abilities to recognise an apple and grab a paint brush to reproduce it using watercolours, at the university's laboratory in Tokyo. Tokyo University's Professor Katsushi Ikeuchi and Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music are using the robot composed by multi-view CCD cameras and multi-fingered hands, to reproduce the whole procedure involved in painting by humans.