

National

Fireflies 'light' the way to new heart treatment

United Press International
ITHACA, N.Y. (UPI) — Fireflies — those winged, nocturnal creatures which glow with a luminescent light — have amused people for ages. They also have successfully repelled birds and other predators for years with their revolting taste.

Now, researchers at Cornell University say the chemical responsible for the insect's awful taste may someday be used as a drug to treat certain heart conditions.

"This is an example of how totally unappreciated initial discoveries in science can lead to unforeseen benefits," biologist Thomas Eisner said.

Prior to Cornell's revelation, natural "cardiotonic" agents — beneficial substances for the heart muscle — were believed to exist only in certain plants and in toads used in ancient Chinese medicine.

Fireflies are the only invertebrates known to have such a substance.

Eisner, who worked on the project with chemistry professor Jerrold Meinwald, said fireflies are so distasteful to birds, jumping spiders, mice and other predators, that those animals regurgitated the firefly immediately if they swallowed it accidentally.

The firefly's defense mechanism is so effective, the scientists said, that when they mixed just a trace of the chemical into mealworm larvae — considered a gourmet treat for birds — it still was rejected.

But Eisner and Meinwald discovered that the unpalatable fireflies are pursued actively by females of another firefly species that lack the badtasting chemical.

"These 'have-not' females lure the males who have the defensive chemical by imitating the flashings of the 'have' females," Eisner said. "Attracted to the signals, the

males fly to the 'femmes fatales,' and promptly are eaten by them."

It's what happens next that could be the key to future medical research, the scientists said.

Once ingested, the defensive chemical is retained and the cannibalistic females become as unappetizing as the lightning bugs, which naturally produce the chemicals known as "bufadienolides."

Those bufadienolides are presently being studied by researchers and pharmaceutical companies for their medicinal value.

Eisner said the chemical extract might be used as alternatives to chemicals or drugs already in use, many of which produce undesirable side effects.

He also said it had a potential use in agriculture as a pesticide.

Racial balance in question

High court hears busing case

United Press International
WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court agreed Tuesday to decide an important school desegregation question focusing on California's Proposition 1, which limits the use of busing and pupil reassignment to achieve racial balance.

The justices said they will hear an appeal filed on behalf of minority students in Los Angeles by the American Civil Liberties Union, challenging a state appeals court ruling that declared the ballot measure constitutional.

At the same time, the court agreed to take up a similar case concerning the constitutionality of a Washington State ballot initiative that bans busing for school desegregation.

The Los Angeles controversy dates back to 1970, when a California Superior Court ordered the Board of Education to develop a plan for desegregating its schools. The California Supreme Court upheld the decision.

Limited desegregation did not

begin until September 1978. By the fall of 1979, the Los Angeles school board decided it wanted to discontinue the plan, "due in large part to unprecedented losses of white students," and proposed an "all-voluntary desegregation plan."

Proposition 1 declares no state court may impose a plan for pupil reassignment "except to remedy a specific violation... that would also constitute a violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment."

The original 1970 ruling against the school board was not expressly based on 14th Amendment violations, so passage of the proposition threw the desegregation case into legal limbo.

In July 1980, a state court judge ruled school officials had specifically violated the 14th Amendment. But a California appeals court modified that ruling by allowing the board to exclude "naturally desegregated schools" from mandatory reassignments.

In December 1980, the appeals

court upheld the constitutionality of Proposition 1.

Appealing to the Supreme Court, the ACLU said: "Preceded by blatant, overt legislation openly discriminatory against Califor-

nia's minorities. Proposition 1 is but the latest in a series of efforts by the majority of the state to discriminate against racial minorities."

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High court rejects case of condemned Texas man

United Press International
WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court Tuesday refused to step into the peculiar case of a condemned man in Texas, who acting as his own trial attorney, had argued he was innocent by reason of insanity.

The justices left intact a ruling upholding the conviction and death sentence of confessed killer Samuel Christopher Hawkins.

Hawkins was convicted and sentenced to death for killing Rhonda Keyes, 12, in February 1976 during a kidnapping and attempted rape.

He insisted he was insane and subject to "uncontrollable sex urges."

In his appeal to the Supreme Court — hand-printed in black pen on notebook paper — Hawkins challenged whether police had obtained his confession voluntarily.

He made no challenge of his lack of professional legal counsel — but that issue was raised in a friend-of-the-court papers filed by the American Civil Liberties Union.

"He is a psychotic man whose illness totally prevents him from trusting and from accepting help from any authority," one psychiatrist quoted by the ACLU said. "His rejection of attorneys is a direct expression of his paranoia."

The ACLU argued Hawkins is entitled to a hearing and psychiatric analysis to determine whether he was mentally competent to waive his right to an attorney.

The criminal appeals court initially had reversed Hawkins' conviction and ordered a retrial based on the ACLU's questions about his mental competence to represent himself. However, the court later reconsidered, and at the urging of both the state and Hawkins, set aside its decision. Hawkins had urged the court to act on his own appeal, not the ACLU's.

The legal rights group also argued the trial court should have explicitly warned Hawkins of the problem of trying to represent himself at the same time he was basing his defense on insanity.

The state argued that the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals decision upholding Hawkins' conviction should be left intact.

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