

veloped his ideas at precisely the moment when modern synchronization took hold. The modern sense of time creates a feeling of anxiety, of always being rushed, but at its advent it

also created new (and more relativistic) ways of seeing the world and an enormous feeling of optimism about humankind's ability to comprehend and control the flow of events.

Resilient Rainforests

"How 'Virgin' Is Virgin Rainforest?" by K.J. Willis, L. Gillson, and T. M. Brncic, in *Science* (Apr. 16, 2004), American Assn. for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

The plight of Earth's tropical rainforests—disappearing at a rate of almost 15 million acres a year, with up to two-thirds of the loss due to slash-and-burn farming—may not be as dire as everyone supposes. Evidence has begun to accumulate that many of these rainforests suffered the destructive intrusion of humans in the past, yet managed to recover.

Case studies in the three largest blocks of undisturbed rainforest—in the Amazon basin, the Congo basin, and Southeast Asia—"now suggest that prehistoric human activities were far more extensive than originally thought," report the authors, all affiliated with the University of Oxford's Long-Term Ecology Laboratory.

In the Amazon basin, recent studies indicate that the most fertile regions in the lowland rainforest have a type of soil that was formed by burning and agricultural activities 2,500 years ago. Such "terra preta" soils cover as much as 123,550 acres in central Amazonia. Emerging archaeological evidence from the

Upper Xingu region of Brazil—which "now comprises the largest contiguous tract of tropical forest in the southern peripheries of the Amazon"—also shows extensive settlements between 400 and 750 years ago. "These were complex regional settlements indicating intensive management and development of the landscape and resulting in large-scale transformation of the forest to agricultural land and parkland," Willis and her coauthors write. But after "catastrophic depopulation" during the 17th century, "extensive reforestation" took place.

Recent studies in the Congo basin and the Indo-Malay region of Southeast Asia tell similar stories of early human disturbance and subsequent forest regeneration.

The rate and extent of forest clearing today may be much greater, but "the process is comparable to prehistoric losses" in many cases, say the authors. "These tropical ecosystems are not as fragile as often portrayed and in fact are quite resilient."

At Death's Door

"Darkness, Tunnels, and Light" by G.M. Woerlee, in *Skeptical Inquirer* (May-June 2004), 944 Deer Dr., N.E., Albuquerque, N.M. 87122.

"I was moving very rapidly down a long, dark tunnel. I seemed to be floating. I saw faces which came and went, and which looked at me kindly, but did not communicate. I did not recognize them. As I got nearer to the end of the tunnel, I seemed to be surrounded by a wonderful warm glowing light." So reported a woman who nearly died in childbirth. Indeed, wondrous near-death experiences such as hers have been reported for centuries, and there's no doubt that they're real.

But are they evidence of a spiritual realm—of life after death? Woerlee, a physician and anesthesiologist who practices in Leiden, the Netherlands, thinks not.

After his interest in the subject was piqued by the 1990 film *Flatliners*, Woerlee read many reports of near-death experiences. In an account given in a 1926 book, for example, a woman who came close to dying in a London obstetrics hospital first saw only darkness, then what she called a "lovely