Drop a Line, Save a Whale

As often as not, good science comes from a mix like this: An idea fueled by personal experience, a little serendipity, a whole lot of hard work, and a whole lot of luck. That’s what Durant discovered with his invention of SeaLine, a buoy material that’s strong, biodegradable, and can be attached to commercial fishing nets. “It’s a more approachable way to get involved with conservation,” he says.

Durant, an environmental engineering professor at UNH, was fishing off the New Hampshire coast when he noticed that some fishermen were catching their lines in the mouths of seals. He realized that this was a problem, but he also knew that he needed to come up with a solution. That’s when he hit upon the idea of using a polymerized form of lactic acid—a benign chemical catalyst one-fifth the diameter of a human hair. When seawater slowly diffuses through the material, it reacts with the catalyst, and the SeaLine decomposes.

With $150,000 in funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Durant attended a research conference in New Hampshire’s Seacoast area with histories of different language problems. “We’re looking to see how much of a history of oral language impairment plays out in their writing, and we’re beginning to see that it’s exactly as one would predict,” she says.

What this may show, Webster and others believe, is that people have a continuum of abilities in processing language. Weaknesses first appear most obviously in speech, then in reading, and finally and more subtly in writing. “Another thing that’s not the case in Japan,” he says.

Part of Howard’s job involves finding ways to help pro-
tect, use and enjoy America’s forests. Looking at how this is done in another culture can provide perspective. “We have to learn to get along with the Japanese people’s love of group activity. It’s not uncommon to find groups on weekends working on their insect collec-
tions, swinging the nets through the bushes and seeing what they can catch, or going to parks to observe nature, all together,” he says.

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