Briefly . . .
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A SAGE OF THE FOREST, 80-year-old Swami Vankhandi lives high on India's Nidimba mountain. He is using his spiritual clout to save the region from poachers and revive a spirit of environmental stewardship among locals and even government officials. Swami has planted more than 3,000 trees and hundreds of medicinal plants, posted signs identifying edible tree and shrub species and healing herbs, and he has banned logging, foraging and hunting. The swami admits, "Some people are not happy with me, but the trees and birds are."

TEMPLES WERE CLOSED to the public in Hyderabad, India, briefly in July. Priests in most temples in and around the city performed requisite rituals, but admitted no entry to protest a double suicide of two young priests--Srinivasa Shastry, 32, and Ganapati Shastry, 25, who served at the Sri Sitaramanjaneya complex. The two were found dead under suspicious circumstances. Police conjectured the two were "unable to bear the ignominy at the hands of the temple management," who had charged them with theft. The police arrested the temple vice president and two of the managing committee for abetment of suicide.

AUSTRALIAN PRESS DEFAMED the Hindu God Ganesha with a crude depiction of Him in The Australian, the nation's leading

newspaper, on July 16. The image shows the most loved Hindu God holding a beer bottle, cake, a cigarette and a glass of beer. It accompanies an article which has no mention of Ganesha, leading one to wonder even more at the choice. Three hundred Hindus demonstrated peacefully outside the office of News Ltd., publisher of The Australian. The deputy editor met with Hindu representatives and promised to publish an apology.

IN A FEW THOUSAND YEARS, a tick or two on the cosmic clock, pilgrims to the Ganges river may find a dry river bed. Scientists at the Geological Survey of India (GSI) report that Gangotri glacier, the source of the holiest river, is melting and receding at a pace that could leave the Ganges high and dry. Ravi Kumar, a senior scientist at the GSI, attributes the rate of recession to increased human activity and indiscriminate deforestation of the region. Other scientists point to simply the natural evolution of the glacier, river and planet. But Swami Sundarananda, who lives in Gangotri, states, "In 1947 even this town was full of green cover. Now it has turned into a concrete jungle."

EIGHTEEN LETTERS BY MAHATMA GANDHI were sold for US $33,900 in July by the UK auction house, Sotheby's. Two British Asian businessmen made the purchase for the Indian High Commission (IHC) in London. The letters, written to Indian Moslem leader, Maulana Abdul Bari, reveal Gandhi's anxiety over riots which had broken out in protest of British rule. In 1997, the sale by a Hawaii Hindu charity of a separate collection of Gandhi papers collected by V. Kalyanam was cancelled, and the Hawaii Hindu group agreed to freely give the letters over to the Indian government. The distinction of

the two cases is that the Bari letters were written personally to Bari, and thus were the legal property of his descendents.

BREATHE EASY! A car that runs on tanks of compressed air, producing zero pollution, was unveiled in France in February. It is due to go into mass production in Mexico this year, where it will eventually replace Mexico City's 87,000 petrol and diesel taxis. Invented by race car engineer Guy Negre in France, the ZP engine runs on an integrated system which starts the car moving with petrol, then switches to compressed air. A carbon filtering system in the engine results in emissions that are cleaner than the surrounding environment. The cost (electric) to refill the compressed air tank is estimated at $1.60.

IT WAS LOUD AND CLEAR to all Afghanistanis. On July 10, 1998, the Islamic Taliban movement, which rules most of Afghanistan, amplified a 1996 ban on audio cassettes and gave citizens 15 days to dispose of televisions, VCRs and satellite dishes. After the 15-day period, the religious police promised to smash any equipment that remained. The move aims to stop dilution of

Islamic culture by Western influences and give Afghans more time to pray. Haji Mullah Qalamuddin, a Taliban official explained, "We want to reform society and make it 100 percent Islamic. Televisions and these dishes are corrupting the morals of the young people."

RESIDENTS OF THE SAN FRANCISCO Bay Area were lovingly introduced to the Hindu God Siva through the Kala Vandana Dance Center's presentation, Lord of Dance, at the Spangenberg Theater in Palo Alto on April 26. Ten dances choreographed by Sundara Swaminathan focused upon distinct aspects of Siva. Each dance--and aspect--was detailed in the event's program, giving viewers not only an exciting show, but a memorable lesson in Hinduism as well.

THE UNBECOMING BIDI (Indian cigarette) has become a cult craze among teens in the US. A recent study by a Community Center in San Francisco reveals that 58 percent of students at four S.F. high schools have tried bidis, 40 percent had been smoking them for over a year and 45-percent of bidi smokers were female. The S.F.

Department of Public Health stresses that bidis contain 7 to 8 percent nicotine, compared to 1 to 2 percent found in American cigarettes.

THIRTY-SIX THOUSAND TEMPLES across Tamil Nadu shut down for three days in June to protest wage structures and benefits for priests of non-senior-grade temples. Over 10,000 staff participated in the walk-out to leverage a 23-point charter of demands. Priests performed the core rituals required by Agamic rules, but once this duty was done, they left. No individual services, such as archanas, were provided, resulting in a substantial revenue loss that the government took seriously. On June 12, negotiators came to agreement, including some wage revisions, and the temples reopened.

AT LAST! FOR THOSE TRAVELERS interested in more than just basic food and lodging, we have found the The Vegetarian Traveler (294 pages, Larson Publications, us$15.95) by Jed and Susan Civic. An extensive and worthwhile guide, the environmentally sensitive traveler can now find accommodations and food to suit his or her needs.

Larson Publications, 4936 NYS Route 414, Burdett, New York 14818 USA.