

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#525 - 1996 In Review -- Part 2: More Straight Talk

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As 1996 draws to a close, it is time to turn the last page of the calendar. The 1996 calendar on my wall was sent to me by Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), the most visible environmental group in the U.S. When the NEW YORK TIMES prints opinions or quotations from "environmentalists" in the U.S., three times out of four they're quoting someone from EDF. EDF opened its doors in the late 1960s, a group of young lawyers (backed by Wall Street law firms), accompanied by a few bright scientists, who won a series of stunning lawsuits forcing the federal government to ban DDT and several other chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides, giving all of us hope that "the system" could reform itself.

But times have changed. After years of Reagan/Bush/Clinton appointees to the federal bench, the courts are no longer sympathetic, and won't be for the foreseeable future. The appellate courts are even more universally hostile. Naturally, this has emboldened the corporate polluters. Furthermore, the polluters have become much more aggressive because of three other trends:

(1) For more than a decade, corporate profits have been rising, which translates into greater size and power;

(2) Election finance laws have been easily circumvented and, therefore, control of the legislative and executive branches of government has been readily purchased;

(3) A legal/scientific regulatory system has been established --with full concurrence by the big environmental groups --placing the burden of proof on the regulators and requiring scientific consensus on risk assessments before regulatory control can be initiated (instead of a system placing the burden of proof on the polluters, and basing public health protection on precautionary preventive action). This system has created endless opportunities for contrarian scientists, who create doubt for a living, to paralyze the regulatory apparatus. Thus has science been turned into a powerful shield for business-as-usual.

To stay in tune with these shifts, EDF itself has shifted. As its main strategy, EDF now forms partnerships with corporate polluters, aiming to modify their behavior by schmoozing with mid-level executives. (It must be obvious that any corporation wishing to change its behavior could do so without forming a partnership with EDF or anyone else. Environmental advice is just not that hard to come by. Therefore, corporations are acquiring --and EDF is making available --something besides environmental advice when polluters form a partnership with EDF.) The new EDF strategy seems emblematic of the changes that have occurred throughout the mainstream environmental movement. (For example, the Sierra Club openly endorsed Bill Clinton for President in 1996 while Sierra Club founder David Brower was openly denouncing Mr. Clinton as the most anti-environmental President in memory.) EDF blazed this trail.

The last page of my 1996 EDF calendar offers a 10-point program to "save the Earth" (EDF's phrase) as follows (and I quote):

- "1. Visit and help support our national parks.
- "2. Recycle newspapers, glass, plastic and aluminum.
- "3. Conserve energy and use energy efficient lighting.
- "4. Keep tires properly inflated to improve gas mileage and extend tire life.
- "5. Plant trees.
- "6. Organize a Christmas tree recycling program in your community.
- "7. Find an alternative to chemical pesticides for your lawn.

"8. Purchase only those brands of tuna marked 'dolphin-safe.'

"9. Organize a community group to clean up a local stream, highway, park, or beach.

"10. Become a member of EDF."

What I notice here is the complete absence of any ideas commensurate with the size and nature of the problems faced by the world's environment. I'm not against recycling Christmas trees --if you MUST have one --but who can believe that recycling Christmas trees --or supporting EDF as it works overtime to amend and re-amend the Clean Air Act --is part of any serious effort to "save the Earth?" I am forced to conclude once again that the mainstream environmental movement in the U.S. has run out of ideas and has no worthy vision.

Even among hard-working, down-in-the-trenches, poorly-paid environmental groups, whose work and guts and commitment I greatly admire, I would have to say that successful strategies have eluded us. To make this point, I'm going to look briefly at pesticides. My point is not to take away from the efforts of pesticide activists. On the contrary, I mean to celebrate and honor them. Many people have died, many others have devoted their entire lives --making enormous sacrifices in the process --fighting one pesticide battle or another. People have given up lucrative careers and devoted all their time to fighting the pesticide companies, which are some of the largest and most ruthless adversaries on the face of the Earth. Their families have supported them in this, and together they have all paid a dear price. Farm workers, Vietnam veterans, thousands of innocent families --all have paid dearly to gain the knowledge we now have about pesticides and how the regulatory system has failed us. Along the way, let it be said, important local victories have been won.

To honor these dedicated people, we owe it to them to examine our present situation coldly. Consumer's Union (CU), publisher of Consumer Reports, issued an important book in 1996, PESTICIDES AT THE CROSSROADS. (See REHW #521.) CU concludes that after 25 years of enormous effort by citizen activists, the total public health threat from pesticides is as great today as it was 25 years ago. Without citizen activism things would be worse. However, the most optimistic face we can put on our situation today is something like, "We have fought them to a draw."

In truth, even this assessment is overly rosy. In his new book, OUR CHILDREN'S TOXIC LEGACY, Yale University professor John Wargo makes the following points:[1]

** Between 1964 and 1982, total pesticide use in this country doubled. [1,pg.132]

** Today, nearly 325 active pesticide ingredients are permitted for use on 675 different basic forms of food, and residues of these compounds are allowed by law to persist at the dinner table.[1,pg.5]

** Congress ordered U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] in 1972 to go back and review the health effects of all registered pesticides, one by one. Congress gave EPA only 5 years to complete the job because, after all, public health was at stake. As of 1994 --after 22 years of best effort --EPA has re-evaluated fewer than half of the pesticides presently found on our dinner plates. This health evaluation is now scheduled to be completed in the year 2010, but by then much of the information will be outdated because, history shows unmistakably, new kinds of health damage from existing pesticides will have been discovered.[1,Chap.5] In the meantime, we are all exposed.

** Nearly one-third of the pesticides now in use are suspected of causing cancer in laboratory animals:[1,pg.5]

** Another third of the pesticides in use are thought capable of

disrupting the human nervous system;

** Many others are suspected of disrupting the endocrine (hormone) system that regulates growth, development and healthy functioning in fetuses, children, and adults.

** Some foods, such as apples and milk, are permitted to contain nearly 100 different pesticide residues.[1,pg.7]

** A study by the National Academy of Sciences (which Professor Wargo personally participated in), published in 1987, "demonstrated that no one in the federal government had a clear understanding of the magnitude or distribution of pesticide residues in the food supply or the public health threat they posed." [1,pg.10] The situation is not different today.

** "Government's traditional response to this uncertainty," says Dr. Wargo, "has been to license pesticide use anyway and to assume that exposure may be accurately predicted and carefully managed." [1,pg.14] "Effective control of exposure, however, requires detailed information concerning where pesticides are used; where they move and come to rest; their concentration in air, food, water, or soil; and their toxicity to humans and species not considered to be pests. Understanding these effects for a single pesticide may easily cost millions of dollars. Understanding them for tens of thousands of separate licensed products along with their combinations is a virtual impossibility," Dr. Wargo writes. [1,pg.13]

And: "As the power, authority and reach of international markets [read: corporations--P.M.] expand, our understanding of the environmental effects of hazardous technologies appears to be diminishing. We now have more specialized information, but understand it less." [1,pg.xiii] Think about what that means.

In sum, government regulation of the public health and environmental hazards from pesticides does not work and cannot work. How much more clearly could it be said? By design, the system has failed.

The lesson to draw from all this is that regulation has not worked, does not work, AND CANNOT WORK. We can struggle endlessly to amend the laws and modify the regulations but such methods will NEVER bring toxic technologies under control, will never 'save the Earth.' It is now clear that the regulatory system serves the interests of the corporate polluters because it is a system they define. It is a dead end for activists. Devotion to its regime is counterproductive.

This is a frightening prospect, I admit. To be told that your life's work has taken a wrong direction? Who wants to hear such a message? Many will not be able to, and will devote the remainder of their days to performing more of the same skillful but pointless acrobatics.

For those who can hear the message though, it is a new day. Many are now devoting themselves to a most fundamental reevaluation of the role of the corporation in our culture WHILE CONTINUING THEIR LOCAL STRUGGLES. During the last 100 years, the corporation has modified each of the institutions of our democracy for its own purposes--our courts, our law-making bodies, our schools, our elections--to meet needs defined by the corporation's internal logic. The colonization of our minds is nearly complete. But not quite.

We have said before and we say again, corporations have overtaken our culture and are driving it to the brink of ecological disaster not because they are staffed by bad people. On the contrary, many imprisoned by the logic of the corporation are good people, yet they remain prisoners all the same. They are not free to act upon their individual consciences. Their responsible individuality and their spiritual centeredness has been forfeited, subordinated to the

requirements of the corporate form.

Where this examination of the corporate form will lead, no one can say, just as no one could say in America in 1795 where the incipient movement against slavery would lead. In 1795, white male property owners held all the levers of power granted under the new Constitution. The vast majority of the people had no say (just as today). Success against slavery was not guaranteed then, and success in our struggle to define the corporate form --to make it serve the "general Welfare" (to quote the Constitution) --is not guaranteed now. However, we know that, OUT OF CONTINUED STRUGGLE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL will emerge an understanding of what changes must overtake the corporate form.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] John Wargo, OUR CHILDREN'S TOXIC LEGACY; HOW SCIENCE AND LAW FAIL TO PROTECT US FROM PESTICIDES (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

Descriptor terms: corporations; pesticides; regulation; environmental defense fund; edf; sierra club; john wargo;