

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#500 - Where We Are Now

June 26, 1996

Half of the American people believe in lucky numbers.[1] We do not count ourselves in that half, yet a nice round number like 500 invites us to reflect on events of the 500 weeks that have passed since we began publishing RACHEL'S ENVIRONMENT & HEALTH WEEKLY. Much that has happened has been powerfully positive, uplifting and inspiring, but it has occurred chiefly in response to events and trends that are decidedly dangerous and disheartening.

In the past decade, new, serious threats to human health, and to the natural environment have emerged. We won't catalog them here because we have done so in past issues which are available free to anyone who has access to electronic mail. (To learn more, or to get a complete index to all past issues, send the word HELP by itself in an E-mail message to info@rachel.org.)

Suffice it to say that the juggernaut of toxic technologies (including traditional petro-chemicals, and now genetically-engineered organisms intended for use in non-medical environments), combined with growing human populations and the "development" mentality (which views the Earth and all its inhabitants, including humans, merely as objects to be manipulated for private gain), threaten the fundamental bases of life as we know it.

The response to these growing problems has been a massive outpouring of thought and effort by people working mainly at the local level. Starting with Lois Gibbs's fight for her family at Love Canal in 1978, an enormous social movement has emerged to confront toxic technologies. It is still a youthful, even an infant movement. (For comparison, recall that in this country it took a century of struggle to overcome slavery, and women had to fight nearly a century for the right to vote.) Yet during the past decade this social movement has had phenomenal successes.

It has severely limited radioactive waste burial in the ground; killed 80% of all planned municipal incinerators; closed at least 90% of all solid waste landfills and dumps; cast a pall of suspicion over, and forced much tighter regulation of, boilers and industrial furnaces, cement kilns, and medical waste incinerators; forced new regulations on solid waste and hazardous waste incinerators; severely curbed and regulated international commerce in hazardous wastes; forced a virtual end to the licensing of new toxic waste dumps; stopped ocean dumping of radioactive wastes, sewage sludge and dredge spoils; ended ocean-going incinerator ships for hazardous wastes; stopped the dumping of garbage by naval vessels and ocean-going ships; curbed the dumping of raw sewage into the oceans; forced the agriculture establishment to at least pay lip service to integrated pest management and, more importantly, convinced a significant proportion of the American people that pesticides are dangerous and unnecessary; forced legislation and billion-dollar expenditures to clean up old toxic dumps; killed food irradiation; killed sewage sludge irradiation; passed laws requiring corporate polluters to self-report the immense tonnages of toxics they dump routinely into communities (via air, sewage treatment plants, and direct discharges to local streams); and on and on.

This is clearly a powerful movement that is changing the way industrial people relate to the Earth. School children growing up today view the Earth totally differently from the way it was viewed even 10 years ago - children are now taught that the Earth is something to respect and protect, not to "develop" and use up. (When they grow up and go to work for corporations, these children's views must be sublimated and suppressed, but that is a different problem. Those views now reside in the hearts of an overwhelming majority of young people, and the corporate form that keeps those views from fruition is, itself, now targeted for change.)

Most importantly, this young new social movement now fully acknowledges that the most important issues are justice, power and control. There is no more important question than, WHO GETS TO DECIDE? As a result of this awareness, what used to be the

"environmental movement" is now the "environmental justice movement." The landmark "People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit" in 1991, which formally adopted the "Principles of Environmental Justice," forever changed grass-roots activism in this country and probably in the world. Now it seems to us that the environmental justice movement itself is broadening its field of vision to address economic justice and local economic development and to demand corporate accountability, thus melding into something much larger, which we call the democracy movement. (There does still exist a remnant of the traditional environmental movement which does not particularly value democratic decision-making, which often works at cross-purposes to community activists, and which, to maintain its shrinking base of support, plagiarizes and takes credit for the accomplishments of grass-roots activists and adopts the language of environmental justice while forging alliances with anti-democratic corporate poisoners. But their sun has set and, unless they fully embrace democracy, they will not survive except as toadies kept by corporate polluters.)

This new environmental justice/democracy movement has no illusions about the power it confronts. This movement knows that federal elections this year will spend over \$600 million to woo voters, and that such huge sums can only come from corporations (and their executives, lawyers, and consultants) who thus purchase and subvert government for their own selfish, anti-democratic purposes.

This new democracy movement knows well that the mass media are owned and controlled by the likes of Walt Disney, General Electric, and Westinghouse, and that therefore stories about our anemic democracy, our disgracefully-apportioned economic pie, and our dangerously degraded environment will generally be blacked out on the evening news. If an informed electorate is essential to democracy, the ultra-concentrated control of the mass media is a clear and present danger. On the bright side, an alternative media of astonishing skill and vigor has grown up to fill those yawning gaps with splashes of the truth.[2]

Furthermore, this new environmental justice/democracy movement has reversed the trend of the '60s and '70s, recognizing that the source of most of our ills is not government but is a legal entity called the corporation, an astonishingly powerful social invention that is now quite out of control, systematically pillaging the Earth, demolishing here and in Europe a century's worth of human-welfare institutions, and, most recently, even taking a wrecking ball to democracy itself, buying and dismantling governments to better serve the selfish demands of corporate marketeers.[3] The ultimate struggle for democracy will be fought --probably fought to the death --over control of corporate behavior. Can these entities be made truly accountable to their neighbors, their compatriots, their shareholders, their employees and their customers? Or must they be dismantled and forever outlawed in their current form? It is an open question.[4] One thing is clear: we cannot have a government responsive to people's needs until we put corporations back into their proper, subordinate place, where the Founding Fathers clearly wanted them.

Lastly the new environmental justice/democracy movement has given rise to new criteria for decision-making. Here Greenpeace has led the way. Under the direction of Peter Bahouth, Greenpeace staffers such as Dave Rapaport, Jim Vallette, Ken Bruno, Charlie Cray, Bill Walsh, Jack Weinberg, Sebia Hawkins, Ann Leonard, Pat Costner and others spent the 1980s developing what turned out to be new technical criteria for decision-making. Although the organization became known for its in-your-face, confrontational style, in actual fact Greenpeace became an intellectual powerhouse that drew together important new principles for decision-making. Then in the early '90s ETHICAL criteria for decision-making emerged from the unlikeliest of places, to complete a new system of decision-making for dangerous technologies.

The new technical criteria include:

** The goal must be prevention because managing problems after they have been created is too costly.

** The only way to achieve prevention is to set a goal of zero discharge for persistent and/or bioaccumulative toxic substances.

** The only way to achieve zero discharge is to phase out and ban toxic substances that are persistent and/or bioaccumulative; the words toxic, persistent, and bioaccumulative are each defined, so this adds up to a fairly rigorous prescription for sustainable industrial development.

** To maximize the likelihood of prevention, chemicals of unknown character are to be assumed harmful until shown to be otherwise. (Limitations of science will prevent this from fully protecting human health and the environment; nevertheless, it offers a major step toward sustainability, compared to the risk-assessment-based decision-making techniques we rely upon today.)

** To maximize the likelihood of prevention, chemical-by-chemical risk assessment shall be replaced by simultaneous regulation of whole classes of chemicals (e.g., chlorinated compounds with few exceptions such as pharmaceuticals).

These are the technical bases of a new regulatory approach to toxic materials. In addition, a set of ethical principles for decision-making has also emerged in recent years:

** The polluter shall pay.

** The burden of proof for safety of a chemical, or of an activity or technology, rests with the proponents, not with the general public. (The principle of "reverse onus.")

** To deal with scientific uncertainties, the principle of precautionary action shall be invoked. As stated in the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the precautionary principle says that, "Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation."

** Lastly, Robert Goodland at the World Bank in 1993 developed the principle that, "To be ethical, the project with the least environmental impacts should be selected." [5]

This last principle has the most far-reaching implications: it means that proponents of a new chemical, new process, new technology, or new project of any kind (even consumers making individual choices) have an ethical obligation to consider alternatives (including the alternative of doing nothing), AND TO ADOPT THE LEAST-DAMAGING ALTERNATIVE. Mary O'Brien of Eugene, Oregon has developed the case for "alternatives assessment" in a new book, soon to be published. The assessment of alternatives had previously been embodied in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, but until now it has not been put forward as the basis of ETHICAL decision-making. This is a new departure, exceedingly important.

These, then, are the main developments of the last 500 weeks, as we see it. They are exciting, far-reaching, and filled with hope, and we will continue to report on them. We thank our readers for their kind attention to our work, but most importantly for their own thought and action. Together we can take back America from the poisoners.

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

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[1] Poll reported in H.W. Lewis, TECHNOLOGICAL RISK (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1990), pg. 13.

[2] See THE WORKBOOK Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer, 1996). Available for \$3.50 from Southwest Research and Information Center, P.O. Box 4524, Albuquerque, NM 87106.

[3] Edward S. Herman, TRIUMPH OF THE MARKET (Boston: South End Press, 1995). And see Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, FOR THE COMMON GOOD. Second edition. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

[4] David C. Korten, WHEN CORPORATIONS RULE THE WORLD (West Hartford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press [phone: (203) 953-0214], 1995).

[5] Robert Goodland. "Ethical Priorities in Environmentally Sustainable Energy Systems: The Case of Tropical Hydropower." Paper prepared for International Colloquium on Energy Needs in the Year 2000 and Beyond: Ethical and Environmental Perspectives. Montreal, May 13-14, 1993.

Descriptor terms: overviews; environmental justice; democracy movement; successes; corporations; ethics; decision-making; risk assessment; alternatives assessment; burden of proof; chemical safety; mass media; regulation;