

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#342 - How Do Your Adversaries Think

June 16, 1993

It is useful for toxics activists to ask themselves how their adversaries think. Here we present a view of the world that we believe most well-informed polluters will secretly agree with. The question for toxics activists is: put yourself in the place of a polluter who sees the world this way, and then ask yourself, "How should I behave?" You might conduct a brainstorming session with your local group to play this game. It may help you anticipate what your adversaries are going to do next.

** In the U.S., many chronic health problems are increasing. The medical establishment has had phenomenal success curbing acute diseases like polio and meningitis, but is failing to stem the increase of many chronic ailments. We are seeing increases in many kinds of cancer; immune system disorders (for example, asthma); infertility; tubal (ectopic) pregnancies; reduced sperm count in men; disabilities; and so forth.

** Since about 1988, publications of the scientific mainstream (e.g., the American Chemical Society's magazines) have emphasized that chemicals are causing reproductive and immune system damage in wildlife, laboratory animals and most likely humans. Most recently, it has been learned that many common industrial chemicals mimic hormones and thus interfere with the fundamental cell chemistry of birds, fish and mammals, including humans. (Americans now carry some hormone-mimicking chemicals in their bodies at levels 10 to a million times higher than naturally-occurring hormones.)

In addition, global ecosystems are being severely disrupted (for example, global warming, ozone depletion and large-scale acid rain, snow and fog). In sum, modern petrochemical technologies seem to have unanticipated side-effects that are harming humans, wildlife, and essential ecosystems.

** As Barry Commoner pointed out in 1991, the petrochemical industry discharges roughly 200 million tons of hazardous wastes directly into the environment each year. At \$100 per ton, it would cost \$20 billion to incinerate all these wastes. But after-tax profits for the entire industry in 1986 were only \$2.6 billion, so the petrochemical industry simply cannot afford modern waste treatment and must continue to discharge massive quantities of poisons directly into the environment, if the industry is to survive in its present form.

** The federal government has a related problem. The cleanup of old chemical dumps has proven a failure. After spending more than \$12 billion dollars, the government has managed to clean up fewer than 100 sites. Furthermore, the total size of the problem is large. An arm of the U.S. Congress has estimated there may be as many as 439,000 contaminated sites, plus 6 million underground storage tanks, 15 to 25 percent of which are already leaking. Since cleanup efforts have largely failed, the government faces two choices: either excavate contaminated sites and store the toxic soil in immense steel-reinforced concrete buildings (thus creating an embarrassing monument to technical failure), or convince the public to accept ever-increasing amounts of toxins in their soil, air, water, homes, and bodies.

The Toxics Movement

** The grass-roots movement for environmental justice has grown large and visible. It is a multi-cultural, multi-racial movement. It is beginning to recognize itself as a social force, and to think in terms of broader issues such as decent jobs for everyone and other necessities of life such as a home, health care, basic education, safe streets, clean air, clean water, and safe, nutritious food.

** The movement can be viewed as part of a world-wide trend; more democratic decision-making seems to be occurring in many countries that used to be authoritarian and repressive.

** Many observers have noted that this movement is based on concerns about health. Since it is unlikely that mothers are going to

give up and declare it "OK" for their children to be made sick, this movement seems likely to endure for a long time, until real reforms have been won.

** The movement has been joined by a new generation of health professionals who are asking for fundamental control of chemicals, not merely development of new ones.

** The grass-roots strategy of "stopping up the toilet" (making disposal neither easy nor cheap) has worked, and has forced a reduction in waste generation. For example, because citizens opposed siting of so-called "low-level" radioactive waste dumps, generators of such wastes have turned to other technologies and have reduced their waste generation by 48% during the past seven years.

** Increasingly, the movement is discussing the "precautionary principle" and "zero discharge" of toxic, persistent, bioaccumulative chemicals as key strategies. The precautionary principle says that if a chemical could cause harm, even without scientific proof that it has caused harm or does cause harm, emissions should be eliminated and prevented. Zero discharge means what it says.

** The movement has access to information, computers, and fax machines that allow its member-groups to communicate in ways not possible just 10 years ago.

** However, the movement does not have a common agenda, and many of its member-groups are hardly aware of the existence of other member-groups. The movement is thus fragmented; it has no publication that everyone reads (which would provide a place to debate strategy); it has no think tanks; no real university base; no coherent funding base; no political party of its own; no access to the major party that dominates elections (the Republicrats). It has made no systematic attempt to learn from its adversaries.

** The grass-roots movement is not represented in Washington. Traditional environmental lobbyists lack "fire in the belly" and they lack a down-home constituency. Furthermore, they seem to like "politicking" but in general they fail to see that POLITICS IS ABOUT CREATING NEW DEFINITIONS OF REALITY.

** Environmental activism is growing rapidly among children. Something like a children's crusade is occurring. Equity and justice are increasingly a part of children's new understanding.

Emerging Views of Justice

** It is now widely recognized and acknowledged that the hazards of the toxic economy have not been evenly distributed. People of color, the poor, the disadvantaged, and rural dwellers bear an unfair burden of contamination.

** In the 1990s, a deep worldwide economic recession brought issues of economic justice to the fore. Now it is widely known that a mere one percent of American families own an astonishing 37 percent of all tangible assets. This top one percent owns 49 percent of all publicly-held stocks, 62 percent of all business assets, 78 percent of all bonds and trusts, and 45 percent of all non-residential real estate.

** If stagnation continues and economic growth is curtailed, the pie will not grow larger and people will be permanently stuck with the slice of pie they've presently got, unless the pie is intentionally redistributed by taxation. On the other hand, if economic growth continues using current petrochemical technologies, increased pollution will occur and increased health costs will be incurred.

** Without more equitable distribution of the available pie, some people fear that we will not have domestic tranquility. After all, many crimes are just a way (an illegal way) to redistribute income and wealth.

Business and Industry

** Since 1987, business and industrial leaders have acknowledged openly that the industrial system as we know it is not sustainable, partly because resources have been depleted but even more because there is no safe place to hide wastes. Therefore we know that many political and industrial leaders recognize that the system must change, and fairly quickly. Therefore, their job is no longer to maintain the status quo, but to manage change--quite a different job.

** Industry and government leaders have not published any plans for making the needed changes, moving to sustainable technologies to reduce global damage from petrochemical-dependent economies.

** Corporate leaders are now acknowledging that they need to be accountable to more "stakeholders" besides just investors. They are acknowledging that local communities, neighbors, and the general public have a stake in decisions made by the private sector.

** Increasingly, corporate leaders are being held personally liable for the consequences of their actions. For example, the Superfund program says polluters are "strictly and severally" liable for old chemical dumps--meaning that they bear responsibility even if they were not "negligent" in dumping, and they bear the entire burden of responsibility for a dump even if they did not create the whole thing.

** This talk of increased liability for corporate decision-makers is leading to open discussion of reforming the legal framework that creates "the corporation." The concept of a "corporation" was created to shield people from personal liability and responsibility for their actions. But everyone knows that the only way to get people to behave prudently is to make them feel the consequences of their decisions.

Other Important Realities

** The Earth probably cannot support the world's present population in a "typical" American lifestyle. This probably means diminished expectations not only for many people in developing countries, but also for many Americans. Disappointed Americans may tend to exhibit a mean streak.

** NAFTA and GATT (free trade legislation) will require world-wide "scientific consensus" on chemical regulations before they can be enforced. Innovative environmental regulatory programs will be outlawed; only regulatory programs agreed upon world-wide will be allowed within nations. Furthermore, free trade legislation will resolve disputes by secret arbitration sessions, to which the public is not invited. Risk assessment will become the official standard way of deciding what is an acceptable technology or practice.

** Many American youth don't read well enough to comprehend newspapers, and thus are turning to other media for information and entertainment.

GIVEN THESE REALITIES, IF YOU WERE A POLLUTER, HOW WOULD YOU BEHAVE? SEND US YOUR THOUGHTS, AND WE'LL ASSEMBLE THEM IN A FUTURE NEWSLETTER

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: overviews; hazardous waste; toxic chemicals; hormones; wildlife; fish; petrochemical industry; llw; health; radioactive waste; strategies; precautionary principle; zero discharge; literacy; nafta; gatt; population; liability; sustainability; economic growth; environmental justice; children;