

Operation Eco-perspective



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ECOLOGY HAS BECOME the new theology. It is now "doctrine" to the enlightened that the human environment is rapidly deteriorating and that the world ecosystem is on the verge of collapse. However, there is little evidence to support or refute this generality. Some factors in the environment appear to be improving, whereas others are in decline.

Unfortunately, a greater ecological awareness has been accompanied by a pervasive view that science, and its application in technology, is somehow the cause of all our problems. If scientists would only stop tinkering with the world, nature would restore the balance and all would be well again. This view is widespread in relation to agricultural and forestry practices, particularly the use of pesticides. Use of these materials is regarded as a crime against nature committed by people indifferent to, or unaware of, the consequences of their acts.

Agriculturists often feel they are being singled out and selectively accused of despoiling the environment. However, in these disputatious times, agriculture can claim no such distinction. The petroleum, chemical, pharmaceutical, mining, and electric power industries are also taking their licks. The automobile industry is in a state of shock. Builders of highways, bridges, dams, factories, harbors, canals, waterworks, sanitary systems, canneries, slaughter-houses, tanneries, and sawmills are similarly beset. Higher education has become a battleground. Indeed, even motherhood and holy matrimony are under attack. Only the Mafia has escaped.

The environmental game has become our great national pastime. According to the rules: I name an environmental problem; you propose a solution; I tell you how the solution pollutes the environment; you provide a solution to the pollution problem; I point out how your solution in turn pollutes the environment. . . . and so on. The game is endless and any number can play.

What we are witnessing appears to be something cyclical in human outlook. After a long period of national self-congratulation for seemingly endless progress and mounting affluence, we are undergoing an inevitable period of disillusion and reappraisal. After the binge of optimism, comes the hangover of realiza-

tion, and in the sober light of the morning-after gloom prevails.

The best cure for this kind of headache is a good dose of perspective—medicine currently in short supply. The universities formerly dispensed it, but even these venerable pharmacies of wisdom have contracted the same illness and suffer for lack of the same remedy.

Perspective demands that we look at our environmental problems objectively and analytically. First, we must drop our current line of conspiratorial thinking. Little can be achieved if all problems are seen as part of a conspiracy by various segments of society to ravage the environment. There are those who seem to imagine, for example, that agriculture is hell-bent on dumping chemicals of a poisonous nature throughout our country as some sort of a scorched-earth policy.

The truth is that the public (which is all of us) has too long abdicated responsibility in areas of decision-making and placed it in the hands of the specialists. We have long accepted highways constructed where highway engineers thought best. We have assumed doctors would properly look after health matters. We have expected welfare workers to satisfactorily handle the problems of the underprivileged. We have imagined that the automobile industry was working hard on eliminating pollution from exhaust gases. And we have assumed scientists and agencies were keeping a close rein on the agricultural industry.

All of these assumptions were invalid. We can no longer expect agricultural practices to go unquestioned by the public. Agriculture is not just the most essential industry on earth, it is the *only* essential industry. The public now wants a role in decision-making to make sure that our land, water, and vegetative resources are not being wastefully exploited—or used in a manner inconsistent with public interests. The current hysteria over many environmental policies, blind and unthinking as it may often be, reflects valid public concern. Perspective can only be achieved when agricultural scientists and the agricultural industry take a much greater responsibility for enlightenment of the public and recognize that the public indeed has a right to participate in the decision-making processes of agriculture.