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What is important?

ONE OF MAN'S most basic convictions, held either consciously or subconsciously, is that what he is doing is important. This is wholly natural and appropriate because worthwhile activities lend a sense of value and meaning to an individual's life—and human life without meaning is hardly life at all.

But what appears important to an individual may not be of the same importance to a group of citizens, or a collection of cities, states or nations. And each of the defined groupings of people may, and usually does, have different notions of what is important. Furthermore, as the size of the group increases it becomes increasingly difficult to gain a consensus among the members of the group as to what is important. At this time—when society's problems seem to accumulate faster than their solutions, and problems are becoming more complex—it is even more difficult to determine what is important.

Our judgment of what is important depends upon the point in time and the perspective from which we view the alternatives.

At a time when the earth seemed to be the dominant feature of their existence and travel across this country was measured in months and even years, our ancestors could well believe that our land, air, and water resources were infinite.

Looking back at earth from their spacecraft, our Apollo moon voyagers had a different impression. From their view the earth—dwarfed by the immense reaches of space—was a small space ship in orbit like their own, a finite, closed environment with a limited capacity to support life. It appeared to be what it is in actuality, a closed system with not much water and land, enveloped in a relatively thin layer of air, and with all the resources it is ever going to have already in existence.

A more familiar perspective, a closer

view of our own environment and the variety and range of our life support system is provided by a 4½-hour jet flight across the United States. From this perspective we can see the dynamic relationships of environmental patterns and the transformations effected by man's activities, we can be impressed by the quantitative changes but we can also see evidence of irresponsibility and self-interest in undesirable exploitation of our irreplaceable or slowly renewable resources. The widening scale of man's remaking of the environment inspires many questions.

Why is this prosperous nation's use of energy exceeding available supplies? Why are we crowding together on five percent of our total land area? How have we reached the point where we are faced with the tradeoff between depletion and pollution, between environmental quality and energy supplies? What is important to us?

As an organization of specialists in a University system, we are concerned with the production and use of food and fiber; with maintaining the natural and human resources necessary to meet those basic needs of mankind; with promoting a more balanced use of our land resources; and with providing opportunities for a better life in rural America.

From our perspective as part of a public institution we are trying to identify the major obstacles to the achievement of these goals. The nature of the problems usually present quick solutions, but we can take the long view rather than the short-term approach, and place the public interest above self-interest. As the margin for error becomes narrower, it becomes more important that we choose wisely among our available options. Our role is to view the world, the nation, and the state in the context of the total need so that we can devote our resources to the most important problems.