If you have a tabletop computer and a modem, there is a bulletin board you should be tapping into. It’s called Environet and it’s run by Greenpeace. IF YOU DON’T HAVE A COMPUTER, WE BELIEVE YOU SHOULD GET ONE JUST SO YOU CAN DIAL INTO ENVIRONET. We’re serious.

At the end of this article, we tell you how to call Environet. In simplest terms, your computer phones the Environet computer. When Environet answers, you can sign in and register as a user of the system. If you are a citizen activist, you probably qualify for access to an 800 phone number, to make your Environet access free. To request use of the free phone line, sign on to Environet and send electronic mail to Ben Gordon, who is System Operator of the “Toxics” section of the bulletin board. Tell Ben about your local group and about your personal involvement at the local level.

Once you dial into Environet (whether you’re paying for the call, or it’s free from Greenpeace), you gain access to a group of services that reside on the system. There are four ongoing “Conferences,” or series of discussions on related topics. There’s one on disarmament, one on toxics, one on wildlife, and one called “stepping lightly on the earth” -- the relationship of personal lifestyle to environmental damage.

The Conferences provide a place where like-minded people can trade ideas and information on topics of concern. One person posts an item for everyone to see, often asking a question or making an announcement. Others who look at the item can respond to it; the next person who looks can see the responses that have been posted, then can add a new response.

There is also a private message service on Environet. Any user of the system can send private messages to any other user of the system. When you dial in, the first thing you learn is whether new messages are waiting for you to read.

There are other services on the system as well. Here, we’ll focus on the ones of interest to toxics activists. For example, every day, Environet offers current environmental news from around the world, highlighting those events that Greenpeace considers most important. In addition, every few days Ben Gordon puts new documents into the “files” section of the Toxics Conference that he oversees. These are useful chunks of information on issues of concern: landfills, incineration, and so forth. Access to these materials alone would make Environet worth tapping into. In addition, we now put each issue of RACHEL’S HAZARDOUS WASTE NEWS into the files section of the Toxics Conference.

In short, Environet is rapidly becoming an important source of information for grass roots activists. But even more importantly, it is beginning to form a communications network among activists, so people can get quick answers to pressing questions by asking each other for help. In the next couple of years, we expect to see Environet become the hub of a communication network spanning the entire grass roots toxics movement. Here’s why:

The computer remembers everything. The material can be indexed by subject. You can tap into it day or night, whenever it’s convenient for you. No more telephone tag: when you call, it answers and is available to talk. The computer is never “out of a meeting,” and has never “just stepped out for lunch.”

The key to a successful computer network is lots of people dialing in regularly, to get help or to see who needs help, or just to chat. Environet is perfect for this purpose, because it is so quick and easy to use. With a 2400 baud modem (which now costs less than $200—see below) and free 800 phone access, Environet can become your low-cost, high-speed link to the entire spectrum of skills and talents embodied in the growing movement for environmental justice. But remember this: Environet won’t reach its full potential until you dial in and start to participate.

We think this is so important that we believe people should purchase computers just so they can join the Environet network. (Of course, you would then be able to start using your computer as a word processor instead of your old typewriter, and you could start keeping your group’s mailing list straight—so Environet wouldn’t be the only benefit if you took the plunge.)

To dial into Environet, set your communications software for 300, 1200 or 2400 baud, 8 data bits, no parity, and dial (415) 861-6503. It’s a San Francisco call.

Which Computer Should You Buy?

People often ask us for advice about computers. The cheapest usable system you can get is an IBM look-alike. It’s true that the Apple Macintosh is easier to use and—if you can afford an Apple LaserWriter printer—gives you true desktop publishing, but it costs twice as much as an IBM clone.

With an IBM-type system you can get everything you need for about $1900. For example, one mail order house, Tussey Computer Products, in State Park, PA, offers the following prices: the IBM XT10 computer with 20 megabyte hard disk and monochrome monitor for $979; a good 24pin printer (say a Panasonic Model 1124) will cost roughly $350. They sell a Swan 2400 baud modem for $149. They also sell the software we prefer: WordPerfect version 5.0 for word processing costs $219. For your mailing list, Q&A software costs $194, Tussey’s phone is 1-800-468-9044. This is simply one example of the prices you can expect to pay. To check out other mail order prices, pick up an issue of PC MAGAZINE from a news stand.

This particular mail order house does not sell our favorite communications software, which is Procomm Plus; it lists for $75 but is widely discounted.

--Peter Montague

WRENCHING IN WEST VIRGINIA JUNE 2-3

The next Wrenching Debate will take place June 2-3 in Minden, West Virginia, 50 miles south of Charleston. Minden is a mining community contaminated with PCBs. Local people have organized themselves to fight for cleanup, buyout and relocation. They could use help from people on the outside who can come to Minden to join in a weekend of rallies, citizen hearings, a memorial service, marches, protests and strategizing. For further information, contact Larry Rose: (304) 469-6247; Sue Workman: (304) 469-9122; or John David: (304) 469-9936.

--Peter Montague