The mainstream environmental movement spends its time urging government to regulate corporations that are making people sick while poisoning the planet's air, water, and soil. The book is organized as a case study of only four dangerous chemicals: atrazine, alachlor, perchloroethylene and formaldehyde.

** Atrazine is a weed killer used on 96% of the U.S. corn crop each year. Introduced in 1958, some 68 to 73 million pounds were used in 1995, making it the best-selling pesticide in the nation. Atrazine interferes with the hormone systems of mammals. In female rats, it interferes with the hormone system, causing ovarian cancer. EPA categorizes it as a "probable human carcinogen." Atrazine is found in many of the drinking water in the Midwest, and it is measurable in corn, milk, beef and other foods.

** In 1969, Monsanto introduced Alachlor, a weed killer that complements atrazine. Alachlor is best against weeds and alachlor is best against grasses. Often both are applied at the same time. Alachlor causes lung tumors in mice; brain tumors in rats; stomach tumors in rats; and tumors of the thyroid gland in rats. It also causes liver degeneration, kidney disease, eye lesions, and ovary tumors. Two studies have suggested that it causes ovarian cancer in humans. EPA categorizes it as a "probable human carcinogen." Atrazine is found in much of the drinking water in the Midwest, and it is measurable in corn, milk, beef and other foods.

** Perchloroethylene ("perc") is the common chlorinated solvent used in "dry cleaning" (which is only "dry" in the sense that it doesn't use water). In the early 1970s, scientists learned that perc causes liver cancer in mice. Workers in dry cleaning shops get cancer of the esophagus seven times as often as the average American, and they get bladder cancer twice as often. A few communities on Cape Cod in Massachusetts have perc in their drinking water; a study in 1994 revealed that those communities also have leukemia rates five to eight times the national average. Perc is ranked as a "probable human carcinogen" and we all take it into our homes whenever we pick up the dry cleaning.

** Formaldehyde is a naturally-occurring substance present in the human body in very small quantities. Mixed with urea formaldehyde makes a glue that handily holds plywood and particle board together. Mixed with a soap, urea-formaldehyde makes a stiff foam that has excellent insulating properties. After the oil shortage of 1973, Americans began to conserve fuel oil by tightening and insulating their homes, and it was then that people discovered that formaldehyde can be toxic. In tens of thousands of individuals, urea-formaldehyde has caused flu-like symptoms, rashes, and neurological illnesses. In some people, it triggers multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), a life-long, debilitating sensitivity to many other chemicals, including fragrances and perfumes. In recent years, scientists have confirmed that formaldehyde causes rare nasal tumors in mice and in industrial workers exposed to high levels of formaldehyde gas. It is also linked to brain tumors in people exposed to it on the job (embalmers and anatomists). It is ranked as a "probable human carcinogen" in humans, and we are all widely exposed to it through cabinets, furniture, walls and flooring.

TOXIC DECEPTION documents how the manufacturers of these chemicals -- and thousands of others like them --have managed to keep their dangerous, cancer-causing products on the market despite hugely expensive government regulatory efforts, civil litigation by citizens who feel victimized, investigative news reports, congressional oversight of the regulators, right-to-know laws, and hundreds of scientific studies confirming harm to humans and the environment. The book documents how corporations buy the complicity of politicians; offer jobs, junkets and sometimes threats to regulators; pursue scorched-earth courtroom strategies; shape, manipulate, and sometimes falsify science; and spend millions of dollars on misleading advertising and public relations to deflect public concerns. In sum, the book shows how corporations have turned the regulatory system --and those who devote their lives to working within that system--into their best allies.

After reading this book, one realizes that the purpose of the regulatory system is not to protect human health and the environment. The purpose of the regulatory system is to protect the property rights of the corporations, using every branch of government to thwart any serious attempts by citizens to assert that human rights should take precedence. "At the most fundamental level," write Fagin and Lavelle, "the federal regulatory system is driven by the economic imperatives of the chemical manufacturers—to expand markets and profits—and not by its mandate to protect public health." (pg. 13) Why are so many of us still defining our environmental work entirely within the confines of this hopeless system?

After 27 years of unremitting, well-meaning attempts to regulate corporate polluters, here is our situation:

** The government does not screen chemicals for safety before they go on the market.

** Chemicals are presumed innocent until members of the public can prove them guilty of causing harm. Naturally this guarantees that people will be hurt before control can even be considered. After harm has been widely documented, then government begins to gather data on a chemical, but "the agency usually relies on research conducted by or for manufacturers when it is time to make a decision about regulating a toxic chemical." (pg. 14)

** Industry manipulates scientific studies to reach the desired conclusions. According to Fagin and Lavelle, when chemical corporations paid for 43 scientific studies of any of the four...
chemicals (atrazine, alachlor, perc or formaldehyde), 32 studies (74%) returned results favorable to the chemicals involved, 5 were ambivalent, and 6 (14%) were unfavorable. (pg. 51) When independent nonindustry organizations -- government agencies, universities or medical/charitable organizations (such as the March of Dimes) -- paid for 118 studies of the same four chemicals, only 27 of the studies (23%) gave results favorable to the chemicals involved, 20 were ambivalent, and 71 (60%) were unfavorable. (pg. 51)

** As of 1994, after 24 years of trying, EPA had issued regulations for only 9 chemicals. (pg. 12) EPA has officially registered only 150 pesticides, though there are thousands of others in daily use awaiting review by the agency. (pg. 11) The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has done only slightly better, setting limits on 24 chemicals after 18 years of effort. (pg. 81)

** Close to 2000 new chemicals are introduced into commercial channels each year in the U.S., virtually none of them screened for safety by government prior to introduction. When screening does occur, it occurs AFTER trouble has become apparent. All together, about 70,000 different chemicals are now in commercial use, with nearly 6 trillion pounds produced annually in the U.S. for plastics, solvents, glues, dyes, fuels, and other uses. All six trillion pounds eventually enter the environment.

More than 80% of these chemicals have never been screened to learn whether they cause cancer, much less screened to discover if they harm the nervous system, the immune system, the endocrine system, or the reproductive system. In sum, in the vast majority of cases, nothing is known about the health or environmental consequences of dumping these chemicals into the environment. It's a huge corporate experiment on the public.

The corporations use a single line of defense: we don't know FOR SURE how dangerous these chemicals really are. But this simple strategy works perfectly because Congress has placed the burden of proof on the public, not on the corporations. We have to prove that we have been harmed. Because we are all exposed to hundreds if not thousands of chemicals each day, pinpointing the source of a rash, a headache, or a brain tumor is next to impossible. Meanwhile the exposures continue. The dice in this game are loaded. Why do we continue to play?

Instead, why doesn't the environmental movement come together to discuss a new strategy -- one that asserts the right of a sovereign people to control subordinate entities like corporations? We could lawfully shift the burden of proof onto the purveyors of poisons. We could legitimately deny them the protections of the Bill of Rights. (Rule of thumb: if it doesn't breathe, it isn't protected as a person under the Constitution.) We could legally define what corporations can and cannot do, JUST AS OUR GREAT GRANDPARENTS DID IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE REPUBLIC. (See REHW #488 and #489.) Such a program would no doubt have enormous popular appeal because so many people have been treated with injustice and disrespect by one corporation or another in recent years. Why keep wasting our time? Let's get together and focus our energy on DEFINING (not regulating) corporations. It's the only way we'll ever achieve environmental protection. And it would give people some control over their lives once again.

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

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