Readers have been asking, why would the NEW YORK TIMES align itself with the so-called wise use movement? (See RHWN #331 and #330.) We can only speculate, but there are perhaps many reasons.

Perhaps it partly because the TIMES itself is a major polluter that was sued in August, 1991, for $1.3 billion by two Canadian Indian nations who accused the TIMES of polluting their waters and their fish with dioxins spewed from a paper mill the TIMES partly owned until they sold their share in December, 1991.[1]

Perhaps it is partly because some individual TIMES writers enjoy the simple rhetoric of the so-called wise use movement--the only real problem we face is big government wasting billions of our tax dollars regulating us to death. (Such simple ideas are powerfully attractive; after all, such ideas kept Ronald Reagan and George Bush in high office for 12 years while their friends and associates, both Republican and Democrat, raided the national treasury, which they refilled periodically by borrowing from future generations, creating a debt unprecedented in the history of the world.)

But perhaps it is even more fundamental. The TIMES is known as America's newspaper of record. The TIMES tries to comprehend, and reflect American society, to hold up a mirror so we can see ourselves. It is only natural that they select what they think we should see; it could not be otherwise. What is the reality the TIMES wants us to see?

Here is a hypothesis:

The main message of the TIMES's five-part series was that "low" exposures to chemicals and radiation are not harmful to humans or ecosystems, at least not harmful enough to warrant the expenditure of billions of dollars for protection.

There are two realities at work here. First there is Superfund, the law Congress passed in 1980 to clean up old chemical dumps. And second there is the reality of ongoing U.S. waste production, which increases relentlessly each year at a steady 6.5 to 7.5 percent, total annual production doubling every 10 to 12 years.

Superfund: the Problem of Old Chemical Dumps

Superfund was passed in 1980 with high hopes that old chemical dumps could be located and cleaned up promptly. No one imagined that the problem was as large as it turned out to be. Congress and environmentalists thought a few new technologies would be developed that would clean up the problem within 10 years or so. But as the 1980s dragged on, more and more contaminated sites were discovered, and no technologies were found that could clean them up. Between 1980 and 1986, $1.6 billion was spent but only 13 sites were cleaned up.[2]

In 1989, Congress's Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) pointed out that numerous studies had shown that the standard remedy for Superfund sites, a technique called pump-and-treat, was not working. Pump-and- treat tries to pump chemicals up to the surface and detoxify them. The trouble is, even after years of pumping, sufficient chemicals remain underground to continuously contaminate enormous quantities of groundwater--the drinking water supply of half the American people and 95 percent of rural residents (see RHWN #163). Furthermore, OTA estimated the size of the whole problem and concluded that there might be as many as 439,000 contaminated sites (RHWN #272), plus six million individual underground storage tanks, 15 to 25 percent of which are already leaking (see RHWN #229 revised). In 1991 the National Academy of Sciences confirmed that people living near chemical dumps have been shown to suffer from "birth defects, spontaneous abortions, cardiac anomalies [heart problems], fatigue, and neurologic impairment" and that "some studies have detected excesses of cancer in residents exposed to compounds found at hazardous waste sites." Furthermore, the National Academy said, "Millions of tons of hazardous materials are slowly migrating into groundwater in areas where they could pose problems in the future, even though current risks could be negligible." (See RHWN #271.) (Another form of borrowing from future generations.)

By the early 1990s, it was clear that the only way to achieve the central goal of the Superfund law (to protect the public from old chemical dumps) would be to excavate the contaminated soil and store it above-ground in steel-reinforced concrete buildings. (See RHWN #260.) This solution, however, suffers from a major drawback: it would make the size of the problem visible to everyone, and therefore eventually might create major unrest among the public.

Therefore, solving the problem of old chemical dumps is now known to be technically difficult, very costly, and potentially politically explosive.

Continually-increasing waste generation

As the 1980s progressed, the size of the ongoing waste-creation problem came into clearer focus. In 1973 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimated the U.S. was producing 100 pounds of toxic waste for each citizen each year, a total of 10 million tons annually. But by 1991 the National Academy of Sciences put the figure at 48,000 pounds per year for each citizen, or 6 billion tons total each year. (See RHWN #272.) Of this large total the petrochemical industry discharges an estimated 400 billion pounds (200 million tons) directly into the environment each year. If this waste were required to be incinerated at a cost of $100 per ton, waste processing would cost the petrochemical industry $20 billion each year. However, in 1986 the total after-tax profits of the petrochemical industry were only $2.6 billion, so $20 billion is simply not available for waste processing.[3] If it is to survive in its present form, therefore, the petrochemical industry must continue to use the free services of the natural environment for most waste disposal, which is in fact what happens: the vast majority of wastes still go into pits, ponds, lagoons, landfills and sewer systems, then into the environment. So long as petrochemical products are produced in anything like current quantities, there is no realistic prospect that the accumulation of toxics in the environment will even be stabilized, much less reduced.

A Social Movement Seeking Justice Arises

Meanwhile, starting in 1978 a social movement sprang up around Superfund sites, made up of people who had observed, first-hand, health damage and suffering in their families and in their neighbors' families. These people naturally wanted cleanup to occur quickly because they believed they and their children were in constant danger. Even though less than 1 percent of Superfund monies were spent on health studies, sufficient scientific investigations were completed to convince a reasonable person that many Superfund sites endanger nearby residents. (For example, see RHWN #115, #127, #272, #276, #313.)

As the 1980s progressed, the social movement that started around dump sites began to recognize that its membership was not a randomly- selected group of Americans but was disproportionately poor and non-white or Spanish-speaking. The concept of "environmental justice" began to occur to people, as they looked around their neighborhoods and saw obvious environmental injustices. The NEW YORK TIMES reported the existence of this social movement in a front-page story January 11, 1993--some six years after the movement began to describe itself in terms of "justice" and 15 years after the movement sprang into being at Love Canal. Curiously, in its January, 1993, story the TIMES chose to portray this social movement as entirely non-white, surely one of the greatest distortions the TIMES has ever put into print. Why might the TIMES do that?
Between a Rock and a Hard Place

We can see that the influential leaders of American society find themselves between a rock and a hard place. People are justifiably frightened by growing quantities of known toxins now measurable in their soil, food, water, air, homes and bodies. People recognize that these toxins are everywhere, but are unevenly distributed, with the poor and the dispossessed receiving an unfairly large exposure. The poor and dispossessed have grown self-conscious about their situation and have made it clear that they intend to do something about it. They are motivated not merely by a yearning to share in the wealth and opportunity of this nation, but by the knowledge that their health and the health of their children is what's at stake. Their movement is a clear case of the have-nots making just demands of the haves.

This movement for environmental justice, as we have observed it, increasingly employs the one tactic that major polluters have never learned to handle: non-violent direct confrontation. Using non-violence, people are demanding simple justice, and the voice and visibility of this social movement is steadily growing.

What options do the leaders of American society (and, implicitly, the NEW YORK TIMES) have? They could of course confront toxins head on and begin to talk about the necessary changes, chief among them pollution prevention, toxics use reduction (phrases that never appeared in the TIMES'S 5-part series) and redress of inequities.

Or, alternatively, they could repeatedly assert that "low" levels of toxins are safe, and that people living near Superfund dumps are simply trying to rob the public treasury of trillions of dollars. Learning from the tobacco industry, they could employ scientists to say that no harm has occurred to anyone, that peoples' symptoms are psychological or are caused by their own freely-chosen lifestyles.

Or--is it too far-fetched and paranoid to suggest?--the so-called wise use movement, which is not opposed to the use of violence, could be incited, perhaps provoking a violent counter-attack from those seeking environmental justice. So long as advocates of environmental justice use only non-violent direct confrontation, major polluters have no easy way of dismissing their fundamental claims. But should this movement turn to violence, it could disappear from the American scene within a year or two. Such things have been observed in America before.

--Peter Montague


[2] In 1991 the NEW YORK TIMES reported (6/16/91, Section 3, pgs 1, 6) that 60 Superfund sites had been cleaned up at a cost of $11.5 billion.


Descriptor terms: new york times; superfund; remedial action; pollution prevention; costs; landfilling; hazardous waste generation; statistics; chemical industry; petroleum; oil;