After Union Carbide Corporation killed an estimated 8000 workers and townspeople in Bhopal, India in December, 1984 (injuring up to 300,000 others, 50,000 of them seriously) because of flawed plant design and faulty maintenance (see RHWN #170), the company felt the need to improve its image. Five years later, in December, 1989, Carbide issued a report called Toward Environmental Excellence: A Progress Report in which it claimed major progress reducing emissions and discharges from its many U.S. chemical plants, and, further, claimed substantial progress in actual pollution prevention--creating less waste in the first place. In short, Carbide presented itself in 1989 as a company that had reformed itself and was now leading the U.S. chemical industry in developing a modern approach to environmental protection.

Part of Carbide's new image involves the placement of company officials on the boards of directors of national environmental organizations. Carbide now has one or more of its top people (directors, CEOs, or vice presidents) on the governing boards of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF, the environmental group formerly headed by William Reilly, now chief of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency), the World Resources Institute (WRI), the Wilderness Society, and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) where Carbide officials serve not on the board of trustees but on a non-government advisory body called the chairman's council. (MULTINATIONAL MONITOR, March, 1990, pg. 10-12.)

In sum, it appeared in 1989 that Carbide had managed to rehabilitate itself almost entirely--not only had it declared itself on a cutting-edge industrial track (pollution prevention) but it had been welcomed into the fold by some of the nation's leading environmental organizations. Presumably Carbide's claims had been scrutinized by such groups and had been certified as honest, well-intentioned, and true.

Now, however, a detailed new report reveals that Carbide has basically not cleaned up its act at all, and that the company has cynically manipulated data to make it appear that they have reduced wastes when, in fact, their waste generation has increased substantially in recent years. Furthermore, the report charges that Carbide has shifted waste disposal from air to land and to water--hardly a progressive environmental direction. The report charges that Carbide's chemical management and environmental programs are putting the company's assets in jeopardy because of longterm liability resulting from poor environmental management (on-site burial of large quantities of hazardous wastes). Carbide is already a potentially responsible party (a known or suspected dumper) at 21 Superfund sites where it faces a liability of $421 million dollars; the new report estimates that Carbide faces an additional liability of $250 million for cleanup costs from dumps it has created on its own property at various chemical plants around the U.S.


Most importantly, this new report reveals how an unprincipled company can use the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) [part of the federal Community Right to Know law, which requires large users of chemicals to report their releases of toxics into the environment] to make it appear that they have reduced their toxic emissions when, in fact, their toxic emissions have increased. Grass-roots activists and journalists using the TRI data should study this new report carefully because it reveals that the TRI data must be supplemented by additional sources of information about a company's waste generation if a reliable picture of a company's total pollution is to be drawn. The TRI data can be manipulated to make it appear that chemical emissions and releases are being reduced when, in fact, they are increasing.

Another lesson to be drawn from this new report is that unworthy companies can find acceptance among some sectors of the American environmental community without deserving such acceptance.

Specifics:

Carbide's claims: On pg. 1 of its 1989 report, Carbide said, "We're finding ways to reduce the amount of wastes from our production operations."

The facts: In 1988, Union Carbide generated 301 million pounds of hazardous wastes--an increase of 70 million pounds over 1987, a 30.3% growth in waste generation.

Carbide's claims: In its 1989 report (pg. 6), Carbide said, "Here are a few of our source reduction accomplishments: Institute, WV--Reduced annual waste generation in one production unit by 3.4 million pounds-- some 60%.... Seadrift, TX--Reduced its largest hazardous waste stream by 20%.... Reduced the annual amount of waste solvent generated by over two million pounds... Additional technology modifications resulted in a 650,000-pound reduction in annual waste generation. By adjusting production schedules... cut annual waste generation by an additional 275,000 pounds."

The facts: Carbide's claim of a total reduction of 5.4 million pounds of wastes generated at its plants in Seadrift, TX, Institute, WV, and Sisterville, WV, is contradicted by the company's own official reports to state and federal agencies, which reveal an increase of 17.6 million pounds at these plants.

Carbide's claims: "Union Carbide is committed to making the new law [Sara Title III--Community Right-to-Know] a success. In this, as in the whole area of health, safety and the environment, we want to do a quality job--and we want people to know about our commitment." (Carbide Annual Report, 1987, pg. 6.)

The facts: Carbide became the first company in the U.S. to be challenged under Sara Title III when one of its subsidiaries, Unison Transformer Services, Inc., of Henderson, Kentucky, claimed trade secrecy protection, refusing to identify one of the key chemicals used in its Henderson, KY, facility. (Dembo and others, Abuse of Power: Social Performance of Multinational Corporations--The Case of Union Carbide, pg. 103). Furthermore, Carbide reported releasing 4000 pounds more methyl isocyanate (MIC) into the community of Institute, WV, during 1988 compared to 1987. MIC is the highly toxic gas that killed an estimated 8000 townspeople living near Carbide's Bhopal, India, plant in 1984.

Carbide's claim: Carbide asserts it is a leader in new-style, modern, environmentally-sensitive chemical processing and management.

The facts: Union Carbide's Taft, Louisiana plant generates fully 36% of all the wastes Carbide produces in total. Carbide's Taft and Star plants in Louisiana recycle or re-use (as distinct from incinerating, burning in industrial boilers, or burying in a dump) only 12% of the hazardous wastes generated at the plants. This falls far below the chemical industry average rate of 55%, as identified by the Chemical Manufacturers Association's 1986 hazardous waste survey of the U.S. chemical industry.

Furthermore, Carbide seems to rely to an unusual degree on land dumping in industrial boilers, or burying in a dump) only 12% of the hazardous wastes generated at the plants. This falls far below the chemical industry average rate of 55%, as identified by the Chemical Manufacturers Association's 1986 hazardous waste survey of the U.S. chemical industry.

It is perhaps not unusual for wolves to masquerade as something else. What is unusual is for the masquerade to be dissected so carefully and so thoroughly. Also noteworthy in this case is the degree to which the environmental community has embraced this
particular wolf; Carbide has managed to place its officials on the boards of more environmental organizations than any other company. What does this say about the environmental movement in this country?


--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: union carbide; bhopal; world wildlife fund; william reilly; wri; nrde; studies; liability; tri; ky; la; methyl isocyanate; bob ginsburg; chemical industry.