



For a cleaner Europe

**Nature Conservation
Year is spotlighting
the need for more
international action**

by John Lambert

Europeans are waking up to the fact they are creating a world unfit to live in. And prospects for solving intensifying pollution problems are made less bright because of political confusion created by national boundaries that cut across natural features.

Some aspects of the deterioration of the European environment can be met on a national level through legislation and planning; Sweden is far advanced, and the British are making a major effort. But pollution has an unhealthy disrespect for the political frontiers Europe inherited from the past.

The Rhine, for example, gathers impurities from Switzerland, Germany, France and the Netherlands (SN: 7/19, p. 64). Rhine water flowing from Switzerland through Strasbourg to its mouth in the Netherlands shows a 100,000-fold increase in microorganisms. A pollution chart of the Rhine is known to exist, but even Council of Europe experts have been unable to obtain it. The Rhine water authority that assembled it is too afraid of the backlash from industrialists if their responsibility were made public.

But this year is Nature Conservation Year, promoted by the council, and the emphasis is changing. At a conference held in Strasbourg in February to launch the year, the theme was changed, significantly, from "conservation" to "the management of the environment in tomorrow's Europe." A big effort is on to educate European public opinion to the fact there is more to conservation than keeping the beaches clean or saving rare bird species from extinction, and that urbanization, the relentless growth of industry, new methods in agriculture and the expansion of leisure activities all contribute to the steady and irreversible deterioration of the natural environment. These were the four themes chosen for the conference, and the information on them was gathered from all 14 member countries in Europe.

In the fine-sounding words of the council's official declaration. "Conservation is not merely a palliative designed to put a stop to the impact of growing population numbers and technological progress on our physical environment. Far more, it must be a concerted effort to make the right choices in improving the quality of the environment and creating surroundings that satisfy man's present and future needs."

But a conference of this sort makes no decisions, and as the delegates were warned by Prince Philip, Duke of Edin-

burgh, who had been invited to attract press attention, "This . . . conference will mean nothing at all . . . if it does not lead to practical conservation measures in every European country. All its discussions and resolutions will quickly disappear into the polluted atmosphere, if this meeting doesn't produce more closely organized international cooperation between responsible and effective government departments." The Prince put his finger on the major weakness. Experts aren't decision-makers and politicians so far have been unwilling even to look at the problem's realities.

This failure to get down to hard facts indeed was one of the weaknesses of the Strasbourg conference. The ills of pollution were described in detail, but there was too much delicacy about saying who is responsible. It is going to be a hard fight in most European countries to enact legislation penalizing polluting industries heavily enough or imposing high enough quality requirements on them; economic growth is still too widely accepted as an over-riding priority. And even if controls could be achieved, as some optimistic participants at Strasbourg seemed to believe possible, there remain the more complex environmental problems of which Europeans are just now becoming aware: poisoning of the soil and underground water by pesticides and fertilizers and destruction of ecological cycles through, for instance, thermal pollution from power stations. And there is the unstemmed advance of industry, cities and secondary residences into Europe's last remaining free space.

As a bitter footnote, the Council of Europe now finds itself faced with a powerful competitor for Government interest and support and for the limited funds which are likely to be made available. NATO's new Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society is getting down to work in Brussels, and pollution problems are high on its list. European left-wingers, associating NATO more readily with nuclear waste dumped into the Mediterranean, are shocked; the Council of Europe is angry. But NATO coolly claims that it has the best available machinery for the transmission of technological and scientific knowledge—and for simply getting things done.

Whether NATO really has the will and the means to accomplish major environmental aims is unknown. Equally unknown is whether any other international body can mobilize resources to get the job done; the obstacles are formidable.