

# Environment report: The reality and the illusion

**A presidential council  
supplies the words needed  
to suit both man and nature**

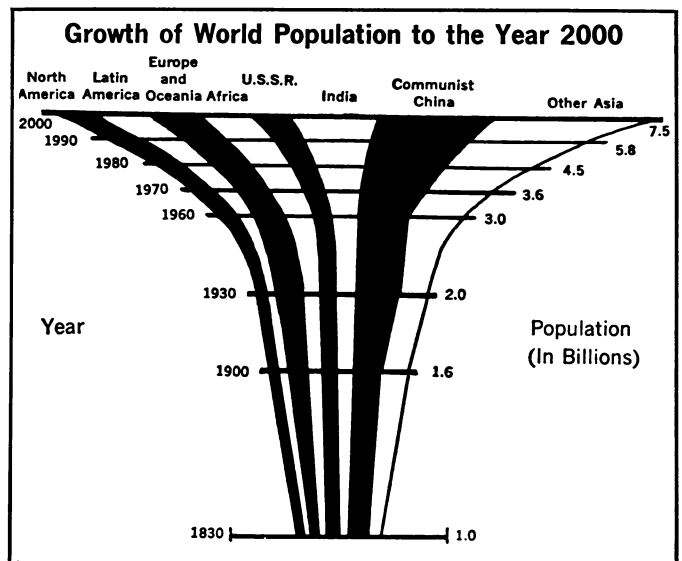
Natural systems and man's institutions are inseparable. These institutions—most of them fragmented, narrow and short-sightedly self-interested—are inevitably, and often immediately, reflected in nature, mainly in increasingly destructive stresses. The cause is man's belief that he is an entity unto himself, separate and different from his surroundings. The result is what conservationists and politicians have come to call the environmental crisis.

The First Annual Report of the President's Council on Environmental Quality, released by President Nixon and Chairman Russell Train this week, although revealing little new data, takes a long step toward clarifying the need for integrating man's institutions and artifacts into the reality of the environment. It is an intelligent and insightful report, itself reflecting this kind of integration.

But unfortunately such an orientation is easily simulated. Men have always been able to turn wise new words into superficial new games. President Nixon, the Congress and industrial spokesmen learned the environmental word game quickly once the subject became popular; but conservationists claim that there is little evidence in the President's actions to date, and in his statement accompanying the report, that he has moved any closer to the reality.

The recommendations in the report are both general and specific, and are offered as guidelines rather than as concrete legislative proposals. For example: "Progress in environmental problems is impossible without a clearer understanding of how the economic system works in the environment and what alternatives are available. . . . Our price system fails to take into account the environmental damage that the polluter inflicts on others."

august 15, 1970



State Dept.

*Population growth: Pressure in environmental decay.*

Two specific recommendations flowing from this general one are for assessment of fees against polluters, tailored to the exact amount of pollution, and for new taxing systems, local and Federal, which would encourage rational urban area planning.

The report deals with the major areas of environmental concern, including the population explosion. It also discusses the institutional problems involved, corporate, local, state, Federal and international, as well as the philosophical underpinnings of a rational environmental policy. The unique quality of the report is its digestion and integration of these already much-chewed-on topics.

However, one new emphasis is provided, on land use, a much-neglected aspect of the environmental crisis (SN: 7/4, p. 5). Urban-area land-use problems, the report points out, reflect maladaptations to the environment in a dozen different areas, including transportation, education, housing, zoning, industrial development, the inner city and taxation. And among all environmental problems, the land-use problem may turn out to be the most difficult to control and reverse, the report suggests.

Among the recommendations, implied or explicit, for a more rational use of land: Federal sewer and water grant programs that withhold funds from municipalities unless there is sound community planning; consolidations of taxing districts to encourage region-wide approaches and reduce the number of narrow jurisdictions; reduction of taxes on improvements to inner-city properties, now over-assessed because of the desperate need by the cities for new tax revenues, and higher taxes in suburban areas where, because of rapid new growth and an expanding tax base, properties are now under-assessed.

Other recommendations are for the creation of green belts and open space in growing suburban areas, elimination of Federal programs and tax provisions which encourage rapid amortization and cheap construction of housing, legislation to prevent further degradation of coastal areas, and designation of more national wilderness areas. But the urgent need for urban mass transit systems to reduce the damaging effects of the automobile in urban areas is given two paragraphs in the report.

The question is whether the recommendations of the report have any chance of implementation in the face of determined resistance by special interest groups and lethargy and penny-pinching on the part of both the executive and legislative branches of Government. Train, for example, recently announced a \$45 million Federal program to develop nonpolluting engines for automobiles (SN: 7/25, p. 60); the money is little enough, but even if it does produce a clean engine, there is no guarantee—or even indication—that Detroit will give up its attachment to the internal-combustion engine. Certainly the land-use recommendations will meet the same kind of passive and active resistance from the real estate and allied industries and their friends in the executive and legislative branches of Government.

But the report sees clearly that these problems are not, at root, to be blamed on the capitalistic system or the profit motive. Rather they are problems that involve everyone, that reflect an orientation to life that cuts across social and economic boundaries. The report's final words: "People in the end shape the environment. If a better environment is passed down to future generations, it will be because of the values and actions of people—all of us—today." □

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