

Stockholm: Weighty talk, smaller progress?

It would be unrealistic to expect large gains at the upcoming conference on the human environment, but action will be possible in selected narrow areas

by Richard H. Gilluly

"What if 800 million Chinese decided they wanted automobiles?" asked Harvard's Roger Revelle at a recent environmental session at American University in Washington, D.C.

Revelle's question was a rhetorical response to a participant who had suggested that consumption American-style is an environmental disaster, and that worldwide environmental harmony will be achieved only if both developed and developing countries stop viewing superabundant consumer goods as the necessary definition of a high standard of living.

Any answer to the question can only be speculative. But the question defines one of the key philosophical issues underlying the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which begins in Stockholm June 5. The conflict has been near the surface ever since a name was assigned to the environmental crisis, and, in fact, it may have been only through the diplomatic skills of Canada's Maurice F. Strong that many of the lesser-developed countries (LDC's) did not decide to boycott the conference altogether. Strong, United Nations under secretary for the environment, convinced these nations that the industrialized countries are not attempting to use the environmental issue as a neocolonial device to suppress economic development or population growth in the LDC's. But the issue is still very much alive, and doubts remain. A subtitle in the June HARPER's over an article by Barry Commoner of Washington University, proclaims, "Ecological crusaders are about to clash with seekers of social justice" at Stockholm. The Commoner article itself is not nearly that simplistic. But, nonetheless, the view is common that environmental cleanup and man's achievement of harmony with nature will inevitably impose a cost so heavy that the world's poor may be locked into their poverty forever.

Commoner himself certainly does not accept such an uncomplicated formulation of the choices, but at times it is difficult to know just what he does

believe. On the one hand, he claims that the basic causes of the environmental crisis are not affluence and population growth, per se, but rather the peculiar characteristics of modern technology. For instance in a discussion

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of natural and synthetic rubber used in tires for automobiles, he explains that synthetic rubber is made from non-renewable resources (petrochemicals), its manufacture causes pollution and it is energy-intensive. Conversely Malaysian rubber trees fit harmoniously into a natural ecosystem; they use sunlight, an ever-renewed resource, for energy; and they provide income to the LDC's that export natural rubber. The post-World War II shift to synthetic rubber has been disastrous for both industrial and developing countries, he suggests.

Commoner seems to suggest in his analysis of the rubber problem that the ecologically sound action would benefit virtually everyone except the petrochemical industry. But Commoner jumps to a radically different conclusion: "As we learn more about the intricate connections between the environment and the economic system, it becomes increasingly evident that environmental improvement is a zero-sum game; if the environment wins, someone loses." Here, he seems to agree

with the HARPER's subtitle: Environmental harmony requires sacrifice of some degree of affluence in the developed countries and of the hope for affluence for more than a minority in the LDC's.

The crux of the confusion appears to lie in Commoner's disagreement with the authors of *World Dynamics*, *The Limits to Growth*, and "Blueprint for Survival," three documents that point to what their authors see as inevitable collision between exponential growth of population and industry and consequent ever-more rapid depletion of nonrenewable resources. These authors, unlike Commoner, believe that simple exponential increases in gross consumption are enough to bring ecological (and other kinds of) disaster, and they doubt that the technological reforms Commoner proposes can produce anything more than a deferral of a crisis that is inevitable unless radically different values and life styles evolve. In a sense, these authors are far more pessimistic than Commoner, but in another sense they are greatly more optimistic, because they would disagree sharply with Commoner that if the environment wins, someone loses. Generally they believe a far better life will result for most people with lower per capita consumption and a more equal distribution of goods, the latter both within nations and between nations. The two factions converge here, incidentally; Commoner also calls for more egalitarian societies.

What is ironic is that both sides are probably at least partly right. Strong, for instance, has told the LDC's that industrial nations do not want to stop LDC economic growth, but seek only to assure that growth is maximally harmonious with the environment. "The solution to the environmental problems of poor societies is to be found in the process of development itself: Development is a cure for most of these problems rather than their cause," Strong said in a 1971 speech. But he added: "There is . . . an increasing awareness of the limitations evident in

the narrowly focused pursuit of the goal of raising GNP." In short, Strong calls for growth strategies that are "complementary" with environmental harmony. Reestablishment of a rubber industry in Malaysia, as suggested by Commoner, would seem to be one such strategy. Another would appear to be growth in the kinds of consumption that are not resource- or energy-inten-

"Stockholm will be a failure only if people expect broad solutions to all of mankind's most urgent problems."

sive, as per the *Limits to Growth* recommendations. These might include ecologically sound growth in food production or in, say, medical and paramedical services and education.

John Kenneth Galbraith's analysis of three classes of the lesser-developed countries is instructive here. Galbraith says growth problems of African nations generally stem from a lack of a "cultural base" and have no internal ideological implications. Few Africans received even a high school education when Africa was largely under colonial rule; thus the new African nations have few technically trained people. Problems in Latin America are quite different, he says. Here antiquated social systems that divert development capital to "nonutilitarian" classes such as the military and absentee landlords, are the major block to progress; in Latin America, Galbraith says, there is an adequate cultural base, if only capital could be released for the kinds of development that would serve all the people. In India and other Southeast Asian countries there is also an adequate cultural base, plus a willingness to distribute benefits fairly. The problem is that no capital surpluses for development can accrue because every spare rupee has to go for food for a wildly growing population. It appears that the industrialized world needs to help Africa with massive technical aid, and India and like countries mainly with capital. Latin American nations have different problems, which perhaps the industrialized nations cannot directly help to solve; at the least, Galbraith suggests, the industrialized countries might stop their support of nonutilitarian classes in Latin America through military and economic aid that rarely does the masses any good.

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In what depth these kinds of problems will be dealt with at Stockholm is not known, but Commoner, for one, is pessimistic. There is some evidence that his pessimism may be justified. The chief U.S. delegate is Russell E. Train, who, as chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality, has given tentative endorsement to the *Limits to Growth* thesis. But at a press conference held May 19 by Train and Christian A. Herter Jr. of the Department of State to discuss U.S. participation at Stockholm, the ambience was much more strongly State Department than environmentalist. State Department officials seemed strongly to suggest they see the U.S. Stockholm role merely as one of playing the halloved game of Cold War one-upmanship with the Eastern bloc. A few hours after the press conference, State Department machinations, compounded by the stubbornness of the Soviet Union, appeared to have eliminated the Soviet Union and most of its allies from participating in the conference at all.

What happened was that the World Health Organization Council in Geneva tuned down WHO membership for East Germany and thus cut off the last avenue East Germany had for going to Stockholm as a voting delegate. A State Department official had earlier told SCIENCE NEWS that the United States was actively politicking to secure this very result. When another State Department official informed SCIENCE NEWS of the 70-28 WHO Council vote (with 25 abstentions) he bragged it gave the U.S. bloc "a better margin than last year [in a similar vote]."

The consequences appear serious. East Germany is the world's 10th industrial nation, and excluding it from voting attendance is grave enough in itself. Worse, however, the other nations of the Eastern bloc, led by the Soviet Union, say they will boycott the meeting if East Germany cannot vote. It appears now that China and Yugoslavia will be the only representatives of the Communist half of the world.

Commoner and others point to other major flaws in the conference. Excluded from the agenda, for instance, is any discussion of the relation of tariff barriers to environmental problems. The urgency of this issue was pointed up in May when Interior Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton announced he wants to give the go-ahead for a petroleum pipeline across Alaska. A major reason for choosing the trans-Alaskan route, instead of an environmentally safer route across Canada, Morton said, was "national security." As Canada represents little or no threat to U.S. national security, the only reasonable explanation of the Morton statement is that he wishes to maintain

import quota barriers—in effect, tariffs—against the Canadian oil that would likely meet interim U.S. needs during the longer construction period required for the trans-Canada pipeline. Morton is heading the U.S. subdelegation on natural resources at Stockholm.

Another problem area is the United States' apparent unwillingness to put its money where its mouth is. While proclaiming its concern for the environment, it announced it will put up only \$40 million over the next five years for a new United Nations environmental agency. This is one-fifth the amount recommended by an advisory committee headed up by Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) and a tiny fraction of the amounts spent monthly in Vietnam for military purposes.

All of this is not to say the conference will be a failure. As Hans H. Landsberg of Resources for the Future in Washington points out in the May 19 SCIENCE, it will be a failure only if people expect broad solutions to all of mankind's most urgent problems, instead of less ambitious, but significant, progress in the sharply limited areas which the conference is uniquely qualified to deal with. These areas include the need for conventions against the ocean dumping of toxic substances, for worldwide environmental monitoring (including baseline measuring stations in environmentally undisturbed remote locations) and for preservation of areas that have unique environmental or cultural significance. A ringing statement of environmental principles is likely to be endorsed by the conference, and it can be hoped that it may really serve as a guideline for future actions and conferences. □

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