

New CEQ appointees given good marks by environmentalists

Beatrice E. Willard of Boulder, Colo., and John A. Busterud of San Rafael, Calif., were nominated by President Nixon last week to succeed Robert Cahn and Gordon J. F. MacDonald as members of the three-person Presidential Council on Environmental Quality. (Russell E. Train remains as chairman.) A recommendation for confirmation was expected to come routinely from the Senate Interior Committee after hearings on Oct. 6.

The new appointees appear to have sound credentials as environmental activists and as administrators, and Willard has a Ph.D. in ecology from the University of Colorado. If conservationists have any criticism of the new appointees, they are quick to point out that it is not really criticism; they are merely concerned that whoever might serve on CEQ in the future will not match Robert Cahn's environmental ardor. Cahn recently returned to his post as a Christian Science Monitor writer after giving interviews in which he strongly criticized some Federal agencies for adhering only to the letter and not to the spirit of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), which CEQ administers.

Willard, 46, earned her Ph.D. from the University of Colorado in 1963. She was once a National Park Service ranger-naturalist. Presently, she is president of Thorne Ecological Institute in Boulder, an institution, she told SCIENCE NEWS, devoted to "increasing man's understanding of the utility of ecology in decision-making." Some 600 high-level business and Government executives have attended seminars and "field learning experiences" at the institute. These included, she says, five Army Corps of Engineers generals who have since wrought a near environmental revolution in the Corps, an agency once known for its environmental heedlessness. She says her philosophic orientation is basically humanistic: "While an undergraduate, I minored in philosophy and social studies."

Busterud, 51, is currently deputy assistant secretary of defense for environmental quality. Before that, he was a senior partner in a San Francisco law firm that often

represented environmentalist clients. Busterud told SCIENCE NEWS that while serving in the California Assembly he was one of the original advocates of diverting gasoline-tax money to urban mass transit, "and it wasn't popular then." He was also an early supporter, he says, of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system. He was active in an organization devoted to development of the Marin Headlands State Park.

Asked if they concurred with Cahn's assessment that certain Federal agencies were dragging their feet on NEPA, both appeared to agree that there is much to be done. "Before NEPA," says Willard, "I had a good deal of dissatisfaction with the agencies. I have continuing dissatisfaction. Too many agencies view NEPA as just another hurdle before they go ahead doing what they planned to do anyway." Busterud, although more sympathetic to agency problems, says "bureaucratic inertia" has so far prevented full implementation of the spirit of NEPA. He adds that he has been encouraged by DOD's growing environmental consciousness, "particularly in the Corps of Engineers."

One environmental activist said he believed that mere association with DOD and its environmental depredations in Vietnam tended to throw doubt on anyone from that agency. But a Sierra Club representative retorted that "Busterud appears to be far more concerned about the environment than his colleagues in DOD."

The main concern of environmentalists is that both appointees might seek consensus to the point of becoming ineffectual. "Betty Willard has been an active conservationist through the years," said one environmentalist. "But there is some skepticism among us about the utility of putting businessmen and conservationists together to seek a consensus, and that is her orientation." In short, he wants out-and-out environmental activists on CEQ. But consensual government has been the inclination of the past two Administrations, and given this current political mode, perhaps he is asking too much.

Louisiana alligator hunt: 'Story not that simple'

Alligators, along with most members of the order Crocodylia, are menaced with extinction, and the American alligator was placed on the endangered species list in 1968. The large reptiles face two problems: First, their marsh and swamp habitats are destroyed to make way for agriculture and industry, and second, poaching of alligators for their hides is a thriving business despite Federal and state enforcement efforts. Although the American alligator once ranged from the tip of Florida into Oklahoma, now the survivors are mainly restricted to southern Florida and southern Louisiana.

So to many it seemed highly inappropriate that Louisiana officials announced a 13-day "experimental season" in September for hunting alligators in Louisiana's Cameron Parish below the Intracoastal Canal. The National Wildlife Federation said the move was

"certain to draw the wrath of many conservationists, wildlife managers and law enforcement officers." The Interior Department Office of Endangered Species appeared to agree that wrath was justified; an official said such a "pre-mature" move would allow poachers to prey on alligators elsewhere and claim the animals came from Cameron Parish.

But Robert H. Chabreck, alligator specialist with Louisiana State University's School of Forestry and Wildlife Management and a member of the Louisiana alligator committee which recommended the season, counters that the story is not that simple.

First, says Chabreck, "intensive alligator management" (including a five-and-a-half-year prison sentence for one poacher) has resulted in a remarkable alligator comeback in Cameron Parish. In fact, he says, there were so many alligators there (an estimated 50,000) that fur-bearing animals such as nutria, muskrat and mink were becoming locally endangered species due to alligator

depredations.

Second, the hunting season was, says Chabreck, rigorously controlled by state game wardens. Alligators leaving the state had to be accompanied by bills of lading and "if you caught a guy in Georgia with 100 alligators, officials would ask, 'Where did you get 'em?' The guy would have to come up with solid evidence if he claimed they came from Cameron Parish."

Finally, the pressure on landowners to sell alligator habitat for industrial or agricultural development is great. Most of the hunters in the Sept. 5 to 17 hunt were local landowners. "An alligator season provides some income to these mostly small landowners," says Chabreck, "and thus it is an incentive to keep the wetland habitat as it is."

The total kill during the season was only 1,350 alligators, about 80 percent of them the more abundant males. Chabreck says one male was thirteen and a half feet long, a near record for recent times. □