

The men who cry doomsday

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COVER: Words and diagrams written on a liquid-crystal slide by a scanning laser beam are projected on a screen. This is one example of the practical applications of acoustooptical techniques. See p. 380. (Photo: Bell Labs)

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In the United States, in 1972, one ventures a criticism of the environmental movement with the trepidation of those who in past years might have questioned the concept of motherhood or the virtues of apple pie. He is sure to be misunderstood or maligned. Environmentalism (notice how the movement has even added another "-ism" to our vocabulary) has become the issue that every right-minded citizen seemingly can support.

In this social context then, one can hardly imagine a book addressing a more fashionable subject while taking a less fashionable point of view than John Maddox's *The Doomsday Syndrome* (McGraw-Hill, \$6.95). Maddox's arguments, however, deserve the thoughtful attention of all who profess concern about the environment and the future of planet earth. Maddox is the editor of the respected British journal *NATURE*, and what he has put together is an attack not on the environmental movement itself but on some of the more extreme elements of the movement or, as he puts it, an attack on pessimism.

In fact the word "attack" is perhaps ill advised, for one of his main goals is to substitute calm, scientific analysis for some of the more strident emotional rhetoric surrounding environmental issues. In this sense, his work espouses moderation. I do not agree with everything Maddox says, but as one who is annoyed by exaggeration and overstatement, especially on important subjects having scientific content, I found myself frequently cheering him on as I read.

In the past decade, he notes, the peoples of North America and, to a lesser extent, Western Europe have been "assailed by prophecies of calamity." Population growth, pollution, overconsumption of resources, genetic engineering, economic growth all, say the doomsayers, spell danger to the human race. They even talk "of the possibility that the temper of modern science may undermine the structure of modern society."

Says Maddox: "Although these prophecies are founded in science, they are at best pseudoscience. Their most common error is to suppose that the worst will always happen. And to the extent that they are based on assumptions as to how people will behave, they ignore the ways in which social institutions and humane aspirations can conspire to solve the most daunting problems."

Maddox notes that his is not a tract in favor of population growth or of pollution. "One of the distressing features of the present debate about the environment is the way in which it is supposed to be an argument between farsighted people with the interests of humanity at heart and others who care not a tuppence for the future. . . . This false dichotomy conceals a host of important issues."

And, he continues, "The doomsday cause would be more telling if it were more securely grounded in facts, better informed by a sense of history and an awareness of economics and less cataclysmic in temper. . . . Too often, reality is oversimplified or even ignored, so that there is a danger that much of this gloomy foreboding about the immediate future will accomplish the opposite of what its authors intend. Instead of alerting people to important problems, it may seriously undermine the capacity of the human race to look out for its survival. The doomsday syndrome may be in itself as much a hazard as any of the conundrums which society has created for itself."

The message is not that everything is all right with the world, but that to remedy what is wrong we need cool heads, accurate, undistorted information, and rational unemotional analysis.

I think Maddox somewhat underestimates the positive aspects of the environmental movement in the United States. (Are not the recent clean air and clean water acts the result of "social institutions" conspiring "to solve the most daunting problems"?) The environmental movement has made major achievements. But the intangible costs of some of the excessive rhetoric are yet to be summed up. (High among those costs would be the at-least-partially misguided recent negativism toward science and technology and a lessened faith in society's ability to engage in any enlightened progress.) Perhaps, now that it has long since gained everyone's attention, the environmental cause can now move into a more mature phase in which scare tactics and "either-or" doomsaying can be supplanted by hard analytical thinking and well-informed realistic action on the whole range of difficult choices to be made.

—Kendrick Frazier