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JUST THINKING

So here I am driving along—now, picture this for a moment—minding my own business.

Well, not entirely, because the SUV yahoo behind me is convinced that his hood ornament looks best when reflected from my license plate frame, so closely does he follow. So I admit I'm minding his business too a bit.

I'm driving along and I hear Gwenn Ifill, late of *The New York Times* but now with public television, reminding all to tune in to radio to hear her "and the nation's best journalists" on the weekly "Washington Week in Review."

So I say to myself, "I wonder who they'll have doing environment."

Logical question.

Answer. No one. Not that week, not most weeks (if ever?).

So on to the next question: "Who would they have if they were going to have someone?"

That one's a stumper, at least with one's mind by now securely glued on the SUV tailgating at closer and closer gaps.

More important than "who" might make up the short list of "the nation's best [environmental] journalists" might be Why.

What does it take to be one of the best environmental journalists in the United States? What's it take to be THE best? Is it the kind of thing you know when you see it, and not until then?

Time was that one needn't have been very good to be the best. When the likes of Hal Scarlett at the now-defunct *Houston Post*, Gladwyn Hill at *The New York Times*,

—see *Just Thinking*, p. 2



ENVIRONMENT Writer

Prime Ink Stems from Johannesburg Run-Ups

WSJ Op-Eds, *Time*, *Times*, and *The Nation* Devote Major Pre-Johannesburg Coverage

Boosted by the August 26–September 4 meeting of world leaders for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa environmental issues got some prime-time newsprint and broadcast real estate in late August.

The coverage flowed just as wilting summer temperatures, mind-numbing floods, West Nile Virus, and raging wildfires left even some doubters wondering if global warming isn't real, and already obvious, after all.

National network news broadcasts gave varying amounts of first- and second-hand reports on the Johannesburg goings-on, some even going beyond President Bush's no-show.

The print media, however, seem to have stolen the show:

■ Perhaps some of the most thoughtful coverage came in a series of special in-depth pieces published August 20 in *The New York Times*.

■ *Time* magazine's August 26 "How to Save the Earth" special report—by now practically an annual publishing event—provided ample context and professed "a

declaration of optimism" amidst the dire numbers.

■ That bulwark of journalistic liberalism, *The New Republic*, in its September 2/9 issue offered a provocative "Who Owns Water?" cover story (Opening quotation, attributed to *Fortune* magazine: "Water promises to be to the 21st century what oil was to the 20th century: the precious commodity that determines the wealth of nations.")

■ And *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page on August 26 also joined the bandwagon, albeit from a markedly different perspective.

News Analysis

The ever-feisty and predictably contrarian *Wall Street Journal* editorial page was having none of all this green eco-hype in the guise of journalism. Perhaps having barely red-lined the tainted "clear and present danger" verbiage, the *Journal's* George Melloan in an August 27 op-ed labeled the 1970s "Limit to Growth" treatise "almost

—see *Prime Ink* p. 3

Want to Keep Getting *Environment Writer*?

Environment Writer is going electronic. We need to hear from you if you want to keep getting it.

If you are reading this issue, chances are that you are an environmental journalist and that you have been getting *EW* for some time. Most readers we hear from say they want to keep getting it.

Now that *EW* is back from its hiatus, "sustainability" has become important to us. We need to get away from the high costs of print-on-paper and first class postage. We plan to convert to primarily electronic means of publishing for the November issue.

Unless we have your e-mail address, you will be left behind. We want to bring you along with us as we move into the new media age and begin publishing on 100% recycled electrons. The benefits are sure to be two-way.

Renewing your subscription is easy! Send an e-mail to kmarstille@aol.com, with "electronic *EW*" in the subject line. Tell us your name, job title, affiliation, and a contact phone number.

In coming months, you are sure to hear from us—nay, be hounded by us—in a number of ways: snail-mail, e-mail, phone, or personal contact. Forgive us for the hounding—and spare you and us the grief by sending us your e-mail.

We value you as a reader, and we want to bring you with us.

JUST THINKING (from p. 1)

Paul MacClennan at *The Buffalo News*, Casey Bukro at the *Chicago Tribune*, Tom Harris at *The Sacramento Bee*, the late Victor Cohn at *The Washington Post*, or Tom Horton at *The Baltimore Sun* all could lay claim to being “among the best.” Each perhaps could also claim “the best,” at least in his own mind and, no doubt, that of a few others.

Taking nothing from any of them—each an accomplished and well-respected journalist in his (Why were they all men, by the way? That wouldn't happen today, would it?) own right—it didn't take much to be among the best when there weren't that many in the first place. When you're the only one in a particular field, the point here, one need not necessarily be “good” to be “the best.” These were both: both good and among the best, but now there is more competition and perhaps a higher overall standard, at least among reporters if not necessarily, ahem!, among all newspaper owners.

Time was that one need only have bylines in *The New York Times* to be considered “the best.” The theory being that the nation's undisputed best newspaper by definition must have the best environmental reporter. Let's face it: *The Times* indeed, by

and large, has had a proud record in environmental reporting and environmental editorials—but being “a *Times* [wo]man” alone is no automatic pass.

I know folks who feel without reservation that ABC's John Stossell is “the best” of class (and, no doubt, Rush the leading policy analyst among journalists). Some likely won't agree, and I count myself among the latter. Perhaps it's instead Gregg Easterbrook, by dint not only of his provocative 1995 book, *A Moment on the Earth*, but also because of his conventional-wisdom-challenging writing generally. Maybe it's Barry Serafin of ABC-TV, although his coverage of late clearly has gone well beyond environmental issues, like it or not. Perhaps Andy Revkin at *The Times* or Joby Warrick at *The Post* stands out, one says with an obvious eastern bias, or, alternatively, Paul Rogers of the *San Jose Mercury News* or... you get the idea.

Forget about Who in any event. There's no one answer, no universal vote getter.

More important is What. What's it take to be among the best in this particular field?


Surely a rigorous commitment to traditional journalistic values—thorough and unbending research and reporting, impartial-

ity, great story-telling skills, strong editing—are essential. A “nose” for news helps of course, and so too might that appropriate “sense of outrage.”

There are, it turns out, many good environmental journalists in the country. And, of course, the usual share of bad seeds. That there may be no single “best” is not a bummer. Just the opposite. It's an incentive to all the others to push themselves to excel, to lay claim to that mantle, to push forward.

The Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) at next month's annual meeting for the first time will hold an awards ceremony honoring top environmental journalists. It's a welcome addition to a field which in the past has been marked by some tainted and questionable awards—the kinds of awards the best journalists actually run from, rather than to. That's not likely to be the case with the SEJ program.

It won't definitively answer “the best” question, of course, nor is it really intended to. Instead, it will help sharpen the focus and help establish one more valuable ring for the environmental journalism carousel riders to reach for.

Go for it. 

Bud Ward

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Metcalf
METCALF INSTITUTE FOR MARINE & ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING

QUOTABLES

(and relevant, though from another context!)

“You know something? You give an enemy enough contingency plans, you can drive them nuts. If you can't keep them secret, you can leak them to death.”

Anthony Cordesman (U.S. Army, ret.)

“All Things Considered”

National Public Radio

July 30, 2002

Just think if newspaper, television, and radio reporters, along with their bylines, topped-off their pieces with the following line taken from articles published, for instance, in *Nature* magazine:

“Competing interests statement: The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests.”

Readers, viewers, and listeners, you say, have a right to expect that from their journalists, so such a statement would be redundant. Duh!

Prime Ink (from p.1)

as subversive as *Das Kapital* or Mao's little red book, for much the same reasons," curbing development. Melloan pooh-poohed "scaremongers" concerns about the world's running short of energy or water, and labeled "flimsy" the science behind banning ozone-depleting gases to spare the stratospheric ozone layer.

Their own "jobs program" is what keeps United Nations and environmental agency employees going, Melloan hooted. "You can also count on the benefit of the doubt from the chattering classes, who feed on predictions of imminent doom and are yet to be convinced that would-be savers of the planet could ever do anyone any harm. Even if the motives of these paragons are suspect, their facts wrong and their judgment flawed, they have purity of purpose."

Damning "media thirst for dire warnings," Melloan wrote, "If you are a poor Sowetan, don't expect help from these guys [Johannesburg summit-goers who "will try to dream up more restrictions on human efforts to make a living"] unless someone wants a shoeshine."

That same day, the *Journal's* op-ed played host to a University of London "professor emeritus" of biogeography who wrote that President Bush "will need to step up in the near future and create a hard line that the United States will support growth, trade, and development and will not cave to the PR vetoes of utopian environmentalists."

Meanwhile, there was the old gray lady's and *Time's* more _____ (fill in the blank) coverage.

What if you threw a party and no one came? That, in effect, is how *Time* Executive Editor Adi Ignatius opened the newsweekly's "planet under siege" special report.

"I probably shouldn't say this, but there is always the risk in preparing a big report on the environment that no one will read it." (Smart guy, this Ignatius.) Years of hearing the blues have led to "environmental fatigue" and a "we get the picture (pollution bad, clean energy good)" frustration on the part of many readers. "Put aside your skepticism and give the Green Century report in this issue a close look," he implored. He quotes *Time's* veteran environmental editor Charles Alexander as saying, "So much environmental reporting emphasizes only the problems. We wanted to focus on the solutions."

Amidst 62 pages of copy—including green ads from Toyota, Honda, BP, Samsung, the anti-smoking Legacy Foundation, the Council for Biotechnology Information, HP, and Ford—*Time* touches on virtually every issue in the environmental retinue. Profiling Charlottesville, Va., architect and industrial designer William McDonough, it points to "an increasing acceptance in the executive suites that industrial reform can be good for the environment and good for profits." In another piece, it raises questions that some environmentalists are "too green for their own good," too uncompromising and with-us-or-against-us in their approaches.

Time buries on one-third of a page—page 60 of 62—Danish environmental skeptic Bjorn Lomborg's (*The Skeptical Environmentalist*) views that all the hand wringing is much ado about not very much.

Sit back now, and settle in for a really good read. With barely a scent of hard news, *The New York Times'* August 20 coverage

should be absolutely required reading for anyone remotely claiming to be a serious environmental journalist (no oxymoron there). A stunning collection of individual essays is wrapped around a basic premise, as reporter Andy Revkin summed it up, that the necessary cultural adjustment involving economic and environmental progress "cannot be engineered with top-down directives. It will be a result of 10,000 decisions, large and small, by counties, communities, companies, and individuals."

"Evidence abounds now that the world is a human-dominated place," Revkin writes. "Hemmed in by concrete," people increasingly "are starting to question their definition of progress," being forced to better reconcile growing needs and limited resources. Cities and the increasing number of mega-cities in many ways "are where the battle will be won or lost," Revkin writes.

"Choices made in the next few years will determine the answer" to whether global society, through science, can reverse the excesses.

Get past Revkin, get beyond his opening piece in the series (www.nytimes.com/2002/08/20/science/earth/MANA.html?tnemail0), and read on. It's a serious environmental reader's bonanza. And don't miss *The Times'* August 26 op-ed piece by the afore-mentioned Bjorn Lomborg, "The Environmentalists Are Wrong."

One more reading assignment. Ready? Don't miss this one.

The Nation's "Who Owns Water?" cover story by Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke explores a "fight for survival" (the *Journal's* Melloan notwithstanding?) in which "the world is running out of fresh water. Humanity is polluting, diverting, and depleting the wellspring of life at a startling rate." Give it another 25 years, they warn, and one-half to two-thirds of the world's population "will be living with severe freshwater shortages."

They write of "20 major corporate players now delivering freshwater services for profit," the two biggest, both French (Vivendi Universal and Suez), combining services for some 200 million customers in 150 countries and driving to expand to "every corner of the globe."

The situation is "formidable" but not hopeless, they plea, if only global society would earmark water as "a global commons" and enforce laws against companies or governments contaminating it.

"The commodification of water is wrong—ethically, environmentally, and socially," they argue. "It insures that decisions regarding the allocation of water would center on commercial, not environmental or social justice considerations... The antidote to water commodification is its decommodification. Water must be declared and understood for all time to be the common property of all... No one has a right to appropriate it for profit. Water must be declared a public trust."

Food for serious reporters' serious thoughts. Story ideas abound. Find them, lots of grist and highly nourishing, in the competing assessments of *The Nation* and of *The Wall Street Journal's* opinion writers. Find brain-food too in *Time's* umpteenth special report on saving the world. Find it for sure in *The Times'* August 20 splendors.

Read 'em. But don't weep. They're proof that there's a whole lot of good reporting to be done. 🖊️

BACKGROUND (This population background was produced with financial support from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.)

Food and Population— the Environmental Nexus

Why Cover Food and Population?

How will the world feed the 2.3 billion additional mouths expected by the year 2030? The link between food and population is worth covering because nearly a billion people on the planet are undernourished. Furthermore, the effort to feed all the world's population in many places threatens to degrade the environment, raising concerns about the Earth's ability to sustain its human population with adequate food supplies. Finally, the issue could give the United States a chance to play a role on the world stage as a "good guy."

According to United Nations agencies, some 800 million people worldwide are malnourished: 777 million of those hungry live in the developing world, and 177 million of them are children. At the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, leaders declared a goal of cutting world hunger in half by 2015. But achieving that goal remained in doubt as leaders met again in Rome June 10–13, 2002, for a "Five Years Later" summit.

Story Ideas

1. Are agricultural producers in your area part of the massive U.S. agricultural export economy? What do the longer-term forecasts for global population, food production, and food requirements foretell for producers in your area?

2. Any action by world leaders at the Johannesburg Summit with regard to food security? See July 25, 2002, *TipSheet* (<http://notes.ire.org/sej/tipsheet.nsf/88cd8c96aea2f1286256acd000afa8d/556b5b0d0c648c2686256c0700094cd2?OpenDocument> and <http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/>).

3. How will the Farm Bill passed by Congress and signed by President Bush on May 13, 2002, affect the role of U.S. farmers in feeding a hungry world? How do current funding levels for food aid programs compare with historic levels and with the need abroad? What about food aid funds in the fiscal 2003 appropriation now before Congress?

4. What trade issues might help or hinder U.S. farmers in exporting food to hungry nations? Do food export subsidies in foreign nations hurt their own hungry populations as well as U.S. farmers? What policy stands has the U.S. government taken on these issues? What will the Bush Administration's negotiating goals be, now that it has the "fast-track" trade negotiating authority from Congress, signed into law August 6, 2002? What implications does the "Post-Doha" round of negotiations under the World Trade Organization have for world hunger?

5. Will biotechnology—the use of genetically modified crop and animal strains—help or hurt efforts to abolish hunger worldwide? Biotech firms argue these methods can offer much in increased yields, reduced loss to pests, higher nutritional content, etc. But critics in the United States and in developing nations say biotech is incompatible with the small-scale, subsistence agriculture, which is the margin of survival in many impoverished rural areas. The need for companies to make a profit—exemplified by the "Terminator" tech-

nology which produces sterile seeds—may only leave farmers in developing countries economically dependent on large companies, they say.

6. Check out what happened at the "Conference on Sustainable Food Security for All by 2020"—aka the 2020 Conference, in Bonn, Germany, September 2001. (http://www.ifpri.cgiar.org/2020_conference/index.htm)

7. Is population growth itself the key variable determining whether the Earth's future millions thrive or starve? Or is it the context in which population growth occurs: agricultural technology, demographic trends, transportation and distribution issues, internal politics, trade patterns, corruption, and more? How does family planning fit into the rural development and economic reform programs that could bring a well-fed future to the Earth's hungry millions?

Background and Context

The environmental connections between food security and population growth are many and profound. Their urgency and complexity offer an object lesson in why good media coverage of these issues is so important—and so difficult.

The vintage "Population Bomb" thesis of the 1960s—that unchecked population growth would eventually use up food-producing resources and create scarcity—has proved somewhat simplistic and unhelpful in understanding the problems in the world we live in today. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization's recent report, *World Agriculture: Towards 2015/2030*, notes two comparatively noncontroversial projections: first, that global population growth will slow down by 2030, and second, that the number of hungry people in developing countries will fall from about 770 million today to about 440 million in 2030.

That's the good news, but it can be misleading. Those 440 million hungry people will still be 440 million too many—not merely numbers but suffering individuals. Moreover, by 2030, the world's population will have grown from the current 6 billion-plus to about 8.3 billion, and there will be a cost to feeding those extra 2.3 billion mouths, including an environmental cost.

The problem, it turns out, isn't merely that the Earth's growing population could exceed its "carrying capacity," but that the growth itself could reduce that carrying capacity.

Feeding world population is not just a "global" problem, but also a problem specific to certain parts of the world and certain classes of society. Global averages don't tell the whole story. Right now, about 99 percent of global population growth is occurring in the developing world.

It often boils down in specific places to problems seemingly far afield from the application of agricultural or contraceptive technology—social and economic justice, war, migration, corruption, land tenure, cultural tradition, religion, ideology, women's and children's rights, food storage and transportation issues, market and trade issues, etc.

In many cases, the "solution" to both overpopulation and undernourishment is the same—rural development. In many impoverished parts of the world, large families are an understandable human response to economic and food insecurity. Aid agencies today seek to bring developing nations to the point of "demographic transition," where greater economic security has actually proven the most reli-

able way of reducing population growth—ending the cycles of desperation that only produce more hungry mouths.

Environmental Issues/Costs

Optimism about the Earth's ability to feed its future population may be Pollyannaish if it ignores one central, paradoxical problem: Simply put, the human species' efforts to feed itself can end up severely damaging the resource base that provides the food—land, water, air, and ecosystems.

Cropland Degradation: About one-sixth of the world's agricultural land area is now degraded to the point of impaired productivity because of overgrazing and poor farming practices, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute. As much as 40 percent is impaired to some degree. That amounts to an area the size of the United States and Mexico, with 12 to 17 million more acres degraded every year. Erosion and nutrient depletion aren't the only way soil gets degraded. Irrigation eventually causes salination of some soils, rendering them permanently unusable.

Deforestation/Land Use Change: The world is estimated to have lost perhaps half of its forests since agriculture began about 8,000 years ago—most of that in the 20th century, when global population grew from less than two to more than six billion. Clearing land for agriculture caused much of that change. As natural forests and grasslands are replaced with cropland and pasture, the Earth's population is losing as well as gaining. Forests not only provide biodiversity, they provide clean water, slow down climate change, and offer sustainable sources of fuel and building materials if not overused.

Fertilizer and Pesticide Runoff: Agricultural productivity worldwide has stayed ahead of population growth largely because of a wide array of technological developments and improvements in farming practices. Even before the "Green Revolution" in plant breeding, artificial fertilizers, and chemical pesticides contributed to enormous gains in feeding the world's hungry—and still do. Again, the blessings are mixed. When they run off into waterways, the same fertilizers boost algae that ultimately choke off oxygen and kill the fish that may also contribute to a healthy diet. Pesticide runoff, likewise, can have harmful effects to both human health and ecosystems that counteract their benefits. Proper use is key.

Monoculture and Genetic Diversity: As humans have settled the globe over the millennia, their survival strategies have been closely adapted to the climate, ecosystems, and terrain where they live. Subsistence hunting, gathering, herding, and agriculture are deeply enmeshed with the cultural traditions of people in specific localities. This has led to an abundance of locally adapted crop and animal strains—such as the potatoes grown by Andean tribes (now considered by first-world gourmets to be part of Earth's genetic wealth). Such strains often have special hardiness, drought tolerance, or disease resistance. This genetic heritage, and the local-culture growing practices that produce it, are essential to global "food security." It may be short-sighted to think all the world's future food problems can be solved with freighters full of western wheat or rice. The huge fields full of genetically identical plants—"monoculture"—have sometimes proved disastrously vulnerable to new or unexpected diseases or pests. The threat is that the miracle high-yield strains that dominate indus-

trial agriculture may lead to loss or extinction of many of the more resilient traditional strains.

Climate Change: The worldwide growth of human population is one of the essential causes of human-induced climate change (See *Backgrounder*, *EW*, July/August 2002). Global warming, in turn, will have profound effects—both helpful and harmful, and often unpredictable—on agricultural productivity. Sea level rise will take out significant amounts of low-lying and alluvial cropland, especially in nations like Bangladesh. Increased drought will hurt crops in some areas even as increased precipitation may help crops in others, and it may be a matter of blind luck whether a given nation is helped or hurt. Human agriculture has adapted successfully to climate change throughout history (and civilizations have disappeared, also often, when it hasn't). (<http://www.fao.org/waicent/faoinfo/sustdev/EIdirect/EIre0045.htm>)

Water Resources/Irrigation: Agriculture is the largest use of water in most places—using about 70 percent worldwide, primarily for irrigation. Water is scarcer than land in many places, and often is the limiting factor in how much food the land can produce. More efficient use of irrigation water is easily achievable—which would mean not only more food for the hungry, but also less stress on the environment. Not all irrigation water is a renewable resource. In many places (including the U.S. high plains), water is being "mined" from aquifers faster than it is being replaced. Background: December 2001/January 2002 *EW* (<http://www.nsc.org/ehc/ew/issues/ew02jan.htm#backgrounder>). "Growing More Food With Less Water," *Scientific American*, February 2001, by Sandra Postel (<http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?articleID=0006AB09-13AC-1C7184A9809EC588EF21&pageNumber=1&catID=2>)

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—see *Backgrounder* p. 8

READING RACK

“Rocky Road: After Green Détente, GM, Green Group Are at Odds Again,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2002: Somewhere out there, there are environmental reporters—lots of them probably—who want, desperately, to be Jeffrey Bell when they grow up. That is, they want his job, or one like it if only there’s another one, anywhere, like it. Bell this time writes of growing tensions between bedfellows GM and Ceres—the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies, founders of the “Valdez Principles” campaign. This piece is in keeping with Bell’s other in-depth front-page *Journal* pieces on issues ranging from the operations of Waste Management, Inc., to a whole range of other environmental subjects. He reports that under pressure from some other enviros that its rapprochement with GM amounts to “greenwashing,” Ceres “is threatening to end its détente with the automaker” and return to its earlier campaigns of stockholder referenda on green issues. GM’s and other automakers’ campaigns against higher corporate average fuel economy (CAFÉ) standards is one pressure point, Bell reports, pointing out that GM, like other automakers, finds fuel-hungry SUVs its bread and butter in terms of profits and profit margins. The company just isn’t going for Ceres’ insistence on specific fuel-economy standards for its vehicles.

“Coastal ‘Crisis’ Grows: Annual Dead Zone Largest to Date,” *The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, La., July 30, 2002: 8,500 square miles—about the size of Mississippi. And counting still. The Gulf of Mexico’s “dead zone,” reports Mike Dunne, quoting the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium’s Nancy Rabalais, is “the largest yet, and larger than last year’s, which was the largest yet.” Dunne reports that Louisiana is losing 25–35 square miles of coastal wetlands each year and that this year’s zone “is four times larger than the goal a special national task force set for reducing the annual area of low oxygen, called hypoxia, by 2015.” He reports that the wetlands “act as a nursery for the nation’s largest fisheries in the continental United States.” The villain: excessive nutrients from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers.

“Deadly or Dull? Uproar Over a Microbe,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2002: Science reporter Nicholas Wade takes on one of the hotter scientific feuds under way in the environmental science field: the safety, or lack of safety, of the *Pfiesteria piscicada*, “the microbe with the fearsome reputation for killing fish and endangering human health.” He points to recent peer-reviewed research challenging the basis for that reputation. “Two warring camps have been unable to resolve their differences,” Wade reports, in part because they won’t share materials needed to replicate findings. Research funding issues and sensitivities also come into play, Wade reports, noting that some \$11 million in federal research has gone into the issue since it first came on the scene big-time in 1997 in North Carolina and in the Chesapeake Bay. Wade reports various research groups’ findings supporting and disputing the research conclusions first put forward by JoAnn Burkholder of North Carolina State, who identified the microbe and maintains it goes through 23 amoeba-like stages in its life cycle, several of them toxic. Wade surveys recent studies by NOAA researchers Wayne Litaker and colleagues and other groups rebuffing the complex life style/many amoebic stages position. (Editor’s Note: Drs. Burkholder and Litaker, and one or two journalists, are to be on a pfiesteria panel on Friday, October 11, sponsored by the Metcalf Institute, publisher of *Environment Writer*, as part of the SEJ annual meeting in Baltimore.)

“The EPA’s Contentious Superfund Cleanup,” *The Spokesman-Review*, Tacoma, Wa., July 21–28, 2002: This four-day series about the Northwest chronicles the environmental battles tied to Superfund clean up in that area and gives an intriguing glimpse into a living history few have experienced. Karen Dorn Steele and Benjamin Shors make clear how states’ and communities’ approaches and attitudes to EPA and cleanup can influence success and create frustration. In 1973 in Bunker Hill, Idaho, Gulf Resources knowingly ran a lead smelter with a damaged baghouse, and for six months released 25 to 30 tons of lead per square mile on the town of Kellogg. “Public health investigators found some kids living closest to the smelter had the highest blood lead levels ever recorded in the United States, condemning some to retardation. Nearly 1,000 children were harmed,” writes Steele. Bunker Hill in 1983 was named a Superfund site, with the government calling the 21 square miles “one of the most polluted corners of the nation.” The cleanup is ending, and EPA plans to expand the cleanup beyond Bunker Hill has stirred resentment and controversy—even to the extent of a local columnist suggesting that federal workers should be shot—with residents claiming EPA has ruined their economy and exaggerated the contamination. Butte, Montana, faced mining contamination on the same scale, but worked with EPA and mining companies to rebuild the city. Steele explains there are many similarities: contamination from both spread more than 100 miles, both are Superfund mega-sites, and both cleanups could last another 20 to 30 years based on concerns that human health risks and serious ecological damage. However, there are also major differences: In Idaho, politicians and many local citizens fought EPA and had to deal with the main polluter’s going bankrupt. In Butte, Atlantic Richfield Co. bought out the Anaconda Copper Co. and its pollution liability, and will spend \$1 billion for the cleanup and environmental mitigation. Another significant difference: Butte leaders, working with the state legislature, pursued litigation, and with money they won set up a \$215 million trust fund; interest is being used for environmental restoration. Butte also set up innovative programs, fought for new structures over remediated land, and built monuments to mining history.

“Tattered Hopes,” *Newsday*, July 28–August 13, 2002: Reporter Dan Fagin’s six-part series on cancer clusters and the scientific and political problems of investigating them stands as a monumental example of the best that environmental journalism can aspire to. Long Island, his newspaper’s home turf, was home during the 90s to a movement of activists and victims demanding studies of what they perceived to be local clusters of breast cancer and other cancers, which they strongly believed to be environmentally based. Fagin chronicles in detail the political process by which studies were eventually mandated by Congress to be done by the National Cancer Institute. He illuminates how politics can corrupt and sabotage science. He writes empathetically about victims’ need for “real answers,” and also describes a long-time smoker determined to show that her own case of lung cancer was caused by environmental pollution. Fagin offers readers no scapegoats or easy certainties, but does educate anyone patient enough to read this book-length saga about some of the analytical methods scientists use to answer questions about environmental causes of cancer. But even as he outlines those tools, he compiles a convincing case that public health officials may not be doing all they could with the tools they have.

Reading Rack (from p. 6)

“Wildlife Shares Nest with Profit,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 2002: Reporter Janet Wilson tells the instructive story of how The Nature Conservancy (TNC) manages its Texas City Prairie Preserve, letting rare prairie chickens and oil wells co-exist side-by-side. The preserve is home to about half of the remaining non-captive 40 Attwater’s prairie chickens in the world. It happens to be in the heart of oil country, “tucked among belching refineries, a power plant and a busy highway.” After acquiring it, TNC not only kept old oil wells producing, but also drilled new gas wells. The Conservancy’s managers insist that the wildlife is not being harmed (although some

environmentalists worry about the risk). And that the \$5.2 million in royalties the Conservancy has collected since it got the land in 1995 can help it protect more wildlife. The Texas City Preserve is in fact just an example of the Conservancy’s pragmatic approach to land management on many of the properties it owns. The article ends up illustrating a sort of Nixon-in-China paradox of environmental management—that resource extraction and wildlife preservation may often be compatible, but that much depends on people’s trust and their perception of the motives of the land managers—be they private conservationists or federal agencies. 🖊

NOSE FOR NEWS

The Coming ‘Indicators’ Binge

Environmental reporters can expect to see an increase in various “state of...” environmental reports over the next few months, as several federal agencies and private groups release analyses attempting to quantify status and trends of natural resources and ecosystems using scientifically derived indicators.

Indicators aren’t new. Familiar ones from the economics field include the Dow Jones Industrial Average, reported daily just about everywhere, and the Gross Domestic Product, unemployment rate, and consumer and wholesale price indices. In the environmental field, the air quality index, UV radiation index, and children’s blood lead levels are common indicators.

But expert environmental managers frequently deplore the dearth of “enough” scientifically rigorous indicators to allow knowledgeable answers to even fundamental questions such as: “Is the water safe for my kids to drink, or to swim in?” “Are outdoor air pollutants behind the increasing incidence of asthma attacks?” “Is our food safe?”

In recent months, the National Academy of Sciences’ National Research Council and the Environmental Protection Agency’s Science Advisory Board have contributed meaningfully to the literature in the field. So too has the Interior Department’s U.S. Geological Survey and Commerce’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which is expected soon to come out with a “state of coral reef ecosystems” report. Several state and regional indicators efforts also have been conducted. *Time* magazine’s “How to Save the Earth” August 26 “special report” had an impressive “State of the Planet” three-page fold replete with indicators of one sort or another (see related story, this issue).

In late September, the independent H. John Heinz III Center for Science, the Economy, and the Environment is to put forward results of its own five-year research effort in this field. Heinz’s “State of The Nation’s Ecosystems” looks specifically at coastal waters, farmlands, forests, fresh waters, grasslands and shrublands, and urban and suburban areas. The report specifically avoids analysis of causes or “stressors” leading to bad conditions and also avoids saying whether various conditions are “good” or “bad” at

all, finding such assessments too subjective and value-laden. The Heinz Center report is expected to be formally released September 24, but the group is also planning a special briefing as part of the Society of Environmental Journalists’ (SEJ) October 9–13 annual meeting in Baltimore, Md.

Weeks later, EPA is expected to issue its own “State of the Environment Report” using indicators to assess air, water, and land resources and stresses on overall ecological condition and on public health. EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman called for the report, the first of its kind for the agency, last November and said it would be part of a long-term iterative process on environmental indicators. Like the Heinz Center report and those that have preceded it, EPA’s report—scheduled for release in mid-November—is certain to identify numerous areas where information and data gaps need to be filled if future reports are to further improve public understanding.

Reporters should beware that indicators, as they say, can be in the eye of the beholder: One set of indicators can show north to be south and blue to be yellow, and another the south to be north, yellow to be blue... and everything in between.

Advocates on all sides, upset over “their” indicators not having been adequately considered, are a virtual certainty. For their part, reporters can seek to determine if the indicators are selected and used as judiciously and with as strong a technical basis as they would expect—or at least hope—a jury to be.

Among key factors for reporters to consider: the general quality assurance, analytical methods, and “transparency” with which individual indicators have been developed; their ability to provide meaningful measures over time and space; their use for the purpose(s) for which they were developed in the first place; uncertainties involved with a particular set of data and implications for related findings. 🖊

Editor’s Disclosure: *Environment Writer* editorial staff have independent contractual affiliations with organizations doing environmental indicators work both with EPA and with the Heinz Center.

BACKGROUND (from p. 5)

—FAS World Food Summit Page: Extensive documentation of U.S. and administration positions on world food issues (<http://www.fas.usda.gov/icd/summit/summit.html>)

—USDA/FAS Press Office: Alisa Harrison, (202) 720-4623 (http://www.fas.usda.gov/scriptsw/PressRelease/pressrel_frm.asp) Maureen Quinn, (202) 720-7115, maureen.quinn@usda.gov.

USDA, Economic Research Service: A thorough, readable backgrounder on many aspects of U.S. food security, including a directory of relevant USDA experts. “Briefing Room: Food Security in the United States” (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity/>)

Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR): This multinational group supports scientific research to improve agricultural productivity as well as protect the environment and biodiversity. It has both public and private members and operates through 16 “Harvest Centers” in some 100 countries. CGIAR Secretariat (housed at World Bank), (202) 473-8951 (<http://www.cgiar.org/>)

International Food Policy Research Institute: The U.S. affiliate of the CGIAR. Media contacts: Michael Rubinstein, (202) 862-5670, m.rubinstein@cgiar.org; Janet Hodur, (202) 862-8177, j.hodur@cgiar.org; Michele Pietrowski, (202) 862-5679, m.pietrowski@cgiar.org; (<http://www.ifpri.org/> and <http://www.ifpri.cgiar.org/index1.asp>)

Population Reference Bureau: An established source of objective and authoritative information on population matters. Press contact: Ellen Carnevale, (202) 939-5407, ecarnevale@prb.org (<http://www.prb.org>). They have one of the very best collections of population-related links online (<http://www.popnet.org/>). “Population, Food, and Nutrition,” *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 51, No. 4, February 1997, by William Bender and Margaret Smith (http://www.prb.org/Content/NavigationMenu/PRB/AboutPRB/Population_Bulletin2/Population,_Food,_and_Nutrition.htm)

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: “Reforming Global Trade in Agriculture: A Developing-Country Perspective,” by Shishir Priyadarshi (http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/TED_2.asp?from=pubdate)

World Resources Institute: An established and academically respected think tank on world resources issues, with a focus on sustainability. Press contact: Adlai Amor, (202) 729-7736, aamor@wri.org (<http://www.wri.org/>)

PlanetWire: This is a free and ultracool electronic news service focused on population and environment. It includes backgrounders, a broad-based daily clip service (subscribable by e-mail), and much more. Press contact: Kathy Bonk or Cecilia Snyder, Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC), (202) 326-8711, csnyder@ccmc.org (<http://www.planetwire.org/>)



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