

Ecology: Consumer Viewpoint

Presented by DORIS BEHRE

The author indicates that consumers are concerned, confused, and caught and pleads for food industry cooperation to attack the problem.

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Consumers' Views on Ecology . . . I could very quickly sum up the situation in three words. Consumers are Concerned - Confused - Caught. I don't believe your program chairman invited me to Philadelphia only to give you three words, so I will elaborate and explain their significance. I will also try to relate the ecology problem to the Food Distribution System.

Consumers Are Concerned

Today everyone is concerned . . . From the beginning of time man has tried to improve the environments around him. But, something has gone wrong. Today our environments seem to be getting worse instead of better. Our air is making us sick. Our water is filled with poisons. Our cities are crowded with millions of people. Crime, riots, confrontations and killings have become everyday events.

How did it happen? Obviously some of the things we've been doing to our environment that seemed right all along must have been wrong.

We didn't realize that each time we do something to the environment it in turn does something to us.

Until each one of us understands that we are not separate from our environments, but part of them, we will fail to see the direct relationship between our environments and our health, our behavior and even our ability to understand ourselves.

We Are Concerned About Our Air

In high pollution areas, the death rate from emphysema has zoomed 10 times more than it was in 1950 and it's still rising. Pollution has been linked with 20 to 30 percent of all stillborn children and at least 7 percent of live babies born with some defect. It has also been found that students in highly polluted areas learn from 2 to 4 times slower than students in non-polluted areas.

Of course we know we need oxygen to breathe in

order to live. But we're getting less and less every day. Right now . . . New Yorkers inhale the equivalent of a pack and a half of cigarettes every day even without smoking. . . . In fact, what we're now breathing is closer to plain filth than air. . . .

We Are Concerned About Our Water

The rivers and lakes of this country serve two purposes. They are both the drinking water and sewers for about 100 million people. Pollution has now spread to every major body of water in America. The Public Health Service rates the water supplies of more than 60 American cities as "unsatisfactory" or a potential health hazard.

Everything dumped into the lakes and rivers ends up sooner or later in the oceans. The oceans have become the final garbage pit. Not only are we killing and poisoning the fish - but, worst of all, the pollution is killing the ocean's plankton, the tiny plant life which not only sustains sea life but gives us 70 percent of the world's vital oxygen. . . .

We Are Concerned About The Food We Eat

When we go into the supermarket, we face an array of sprayed, dyed, waxed and chemically treated foods. The chemicals noted on the label are obvious. Others, such as pesticides, are not visible, but they are there just the same. . . .

Let's consider apples. . . . Can you tell by looking at the apple if it has been sprayed? Was it sprayed and does it have a high level of hard pesticide residue? No amount of washing will remove it; hard pesticides are not water soluble.

Today's food is threatened by the result of the chemist's test tube. The balanced diet of yesterday has become an insidious concoction of pesticides, emulsifiers, preservatives, thickeners, flavoring, buffers, bleaches and dyes. The toxic, carcinogenic and mutagenic properties of many of these substances are already known or suspected.

We Are Concerned About our Garbage

In New York alone, it is costing over \$13 million a year to just get rid of the Sunday paper. Getting rid of our solid wastes is costing \$4½ billion a year. That's almost 3 times more than is spent on all medical re-

search by the Federal and State governments combined. . . . And soon there will be no place to dump it. . . .

There used to be a childish question that asked, "Can God build a mountain so high that he can't jump over it?" Well, I don't know about God, but man is coming close to building a mountain of waste so high that one day he may not be able to burn it or bury it . . . much less jump over it.

As that Dodge Sheriff says, "We're in a heap of trouble."

Recently the Washington Post carried an ad by the American Medical Association. The headline read "IF AMERICA DIES WHERE WILL WE BURY IT?" It continued, "We are doctors of medicine. Naturally, we care about the health of your body. But we care, too, about the health of the body of land you live on. America's body is not well. Its condition is critical. Disease induced by the environment now costs us \$38 billion a year. That bill will go up. If we don't nurse our environment back to health. How to do the job? We at the American Medical Association worry about it. But, we want everyone to worry. Because everyone is going to have to help get the job done. There's no use trying to keep people well in a dead land. . . ."

Americans are currently throwing away things at the rate of five pounds per person per day. Solid wastes of all kinds, such as kitchen garbage, paper, plastics, cans, bottles, junked cars, and other discards are piling up on the landscape faster than they decompose, and not all trash decomposes. At present there are essentially two areas that are attracting the attention of the anti-polluters to the supermarket and its suppliers:

One is packaging, meaning primarily one-way beverage containers, glass and plastic bottles and aluminum cans which have a distressing tendency to end up as litter and which in any event add to the solid waste problem plaguing the country. That is because they are unsuited to disposal by burial or combustion that contributes to air pollution.

The other is non-biodegradable and phosphate detergents, also because they resist decomposition, and in the case of the phosphates pollute the waters through the additional means of promoting the runaway growth of algae — killing off plant life and fish.

Packaging

Most items on the supermarket shelves are over-wrapped. The packaging industry has grown tremendously in the last few years, and with it have grown mountains of solid waste that result when that plastic, paper, cardboard, styrofoam, metal and glass are thrown away.

Packaging is expensive because it is made as attractive as possible to the consumer. A 1967 survey by Modern Packaging indicated that an average of 18.6 cents of the gross sales dollar went for packaging costs.

Consumers Are Confused

Consumers are confused by the on again off again policies of FDA and USDA — by the puffery and misleading advertising of Madison Avenue and by package proliferation.

Cyclomates, phosphates, mercury and other issues have been receiving lots of headlines. And most recently the poison in recycled paper. I've had many consumers tell me that they don't know who to believe anymore.

Consumers Are Caught

Consumers are caught in the unbalance of the market-

place. The consumer and the seller in the marketplace are not equal. The major cause of Consumerism today is the Corporate Deaf Ear. Business does not listen to the public or if it does it listens with one ear that has only marginal hearing capabilities. . . . Yet the consumer hears business through advertising and is often repulsed.

Mr. Robert Keith, Chairman of the Board of Pillsbury, suggests that the Food Industry needs to build a bridge of trust to the consumer with more verbs, fewer adjectives; more news, less puffery; more "as it is," less gimmickry.

We hear lots of talk about the credibility gap. . . . Consumers are suffering from Information Pollution. . . . We are bombarded by half-truths and conflicting reports and claims from both government and the marketplace.

I started by saying Consumers are Concerned — Confused — Caught, where do we go from here?

Problems don't just exist. They are always the result of something else. And every problem contains information about its own cause. But you have to look for it. . . .

First, we must realize that one of the basic causes of the environmental crisis is the fact that Americans are over-consumers. We buy things that we really don't need, just to "have" them. Every time you, the consumer, go shopping, you make some important decisions that affect the environment. You might choose products that give you the most for your money and that satisfy your individual needs and desires. However, another factor to consider is whether or not the items you buy will contribute to the pollution we face, not only in the community, but also in our own bodies.

If we hope to see the real causes of our problems and find intelligent answers for them, it is clear that the solutions lie more in the quality of information than in the speed of our actions.

We would all like to have someone to blame for the problems, pollution and chaos around us. Someone besides ourselves. . . . But, there is no scapegoat.

The crisis in our environment is the result of each of us doing our own little part every day to make them worse.

The solution can only be the result of each of us doing our own part to make them better. Perhaps you have seen the pollution slogan — If you're not part of the solution — You're part of the problem.

Today the wrong things are important to us. We have confused the quality of our lives with the quantity of our possessions. . . . We have confused the wealth of nature with our Gross National Product. We have confused the worth of a man with the importance of his job. We have confused the American Dream with public relations. Our confused priorities have created problems all around us. Some are irritating, some are ugly, some are deadly. In our haste to correct these problems in our environment, we often try to correct the symptom instead of the cause.

For instance, while the ultimate blame for litter must fall on the litterbug, the problem can be attacked from many angles, only one of which, though perhaps the most efficient, is to exterminate the litterbug. And I notice container manufacturers and food processors are acknowledging as much by engaging in a crash program to help solve the problem created by the nation's now unmanageable solid waste by conducting anti-litter programs while working toward the development of more safely and easily degradable containers and of sophisticated container reclamation and reuse systems.

Technology has but one justification; to serve man's needs for food, shelter and clothing, so that he can be free to develop his unique assets — mind and spirit.

President Nixon in his special message to Congress on Environment . . . "Man has applied a great deal of his energy in the past to exploring his planet. Now we must make a similar commitment of effort to restoring that planet. The unexpected consequences of our technology have often worked damage to our environment

Now we must turn that same technology to the work of its restoration and preservation."

Before a new product enters the marketplace, we should consider its by-products or side effects:

Will we be adding to pollution? To the national garbage pail? To the poison already in the air? Will it be safe?

In short, why not formulate a Quality of Life Index that would measure *real* growth as opposed to our Gross National Product which measures only the value of production. When experts such as Arthur F. Burns, Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, recommend that the GNP should be adjusted to take account of the depreciation of our environment I heartily agree.

Our environmental problems did not just suddenly appear.

We cannot correct overnight the many disastrous mistakes we have made. There are no quick push button solutions which will instantly return us and our environments to normal.

As President Kennedy said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step."

I urge the Food Distribution System to take the first step and to engage in meaningful dialogue with consumers on the problems of the marketplace.

Let's all do our part to eradicate Information Pollution which in turn will do a lot towards solving our other problems.

Editor's Note:

Discussion following presentation of the papers brought out the following issues:

- 1. The ecology movement in many instances brings forth the following paradox—what people want may not correspond to what they are willing to give up.*
- 2. What USDA funds are available for projects related to ecology and food marketing?*
- 3. Consumers demanded one way bottles. Providing refunds for bottles has not worked very satisfactorily.*
- 4. The greatest problem in the environmental issue is the individual person, who once they realize they are a part of the problem they recede to the background.*
- 5. Must get people involved in the environmental process. Ignorance is the real problem. Someone should have the fortitude to tell the people the costs of the various environmental controls & alternatives available.*
- 6. The environmental problem will not be solved by passing laws.*