

EDITORIAL

Recently, Columnist Ellen Goodman wrote about the last day of her vacation (in Maine) and the mental revelry of watching her toes wiggle in the circumscribed world of a tide puddle...an exercise she described as a sort of "escape from ignorance." She defined her use of ignorance as meaning the defensive "ability to ignore," and suggested that this cultivated ignorance is the urban dweller's sanctuary from the assault on the senses that bombards him constantly and from all sides.

It is precisely this kind of "ignorance busting" that The George Wright Society is dedicated to fostering. Through research in parks and preserves we are concerned with the keeping of keenness on the cutting edge of our research capability. And through educational outreach we are concerned with the widest and deepest possible dissemination of this knowledge—the awakening of as broad a segment of the public as possible to the cause-and-effect relationships decreed by natural laws that are dependably, relentlessly shaping our future.

The stripping of a steep terrain for coal—the tossing into the atmosphere of the toxic wastes of its burning—the seepage into once clear streams of the acids leached from exposed veins—the eroding of marble and limestone structures by atmospheric acids—these may be considered only "side-effects" by the instigators of the causative actions. But reality does not recognize such hyphenated descriptive adjectives. To nature, a cause is a cause; an effect is an effect. To label the cause "worthy" or the effect "side-" is a *non sequitur* in real-world terms. The economic plus means nothing until it is balanced against the real world's bill of environmental trade-offs. What is the economic cost of setting the world back into systemic balance of the sort that humans prefer? Or do the humans prefer simply to subtract from the real world the quality that the so-called economic plus has cost it?

...continued

These are examples of the way the real world and the world of human perception and understanding are tied together. So long as humankind fails to take this tie into consideration, just that long will the price of ignor-ance be exacted.

It is possible that the end of ignor-ance will NOT be the end of the real world costs—that an enlightened people will opt to continue paying the relentless price of reduction of life quality and diminution of resources. But the chances are equally good that by facing up squarely to the challenge of cause-and-effect and applying our vaunted technology to the problems it entails, we could forge brand new paths into the future, claiming the fruits of technology and reclaiming the natural roots that underlie the harvest...giving rise to whole new industries, jobs, patterns of living.

These are problems of polity, and science can only offer the data on which to make these choices. But science (especially the social sciences as they operate in the light of history) has a responsibility beyond mere research. That responsibility is to make its findings known as widely as possible. Our great and small natural areas and historic/cultural sites should be used as textbooks and laboratories and raw material, AND as classrooms and teachers and town criers. A valid real world ethic that encompasses the demands and the limits of both the natural and the cultural worlds can only emerge from sufficient information.

As we hurtle ever more determinedly along the paths that technology has opened up, we should be aware that our continued existence as a cultured, humane species depends on matching our technological pace with equal strides in understanding how the natural systems of Earth work, and in applying that knowledge to the great and small life support systems upon which we have such impact. □